

COPING STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

The following coping strategies are general ideas, and not all of them will work when your baby is very little. Keep some for later: only a fool would suggest you need a new hobby in the first few weeks or months! Everyone needs something different: one woman's exciting owl-shaped macramé project is another's sure road to screamy madness.

anti-stress tips for parents

- ★ Sleep, meditate, or lie down and listen to soft music or read when the offspring is napping. Set yourself a bedtime and stick to it, even if the dishes still aren't done: there'll always be something to keep you up until 1 a.m., even if it is the 789th repeat of a *Law & Order* episode.
- ★ Ask each visitor to fold ten things from the washing basket, wipe down a surface or make a cup of tea. Don't wait on them.
- ★ Make sure you eat well and don't skip meals. Never skip breakfast or have something silly like half a grapefruit.
- ★ Once a week you can try to cook big batches of things to freeze for the days ahead. Cut up raw vegies and put them in ziplock bags or plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. These can be kept in the fridge and the contents thrown in the steamer or microwave when needed each night.
- ★ Getting outside, doing moderate exercise and chasing some sunshine (with UV protection) are factors that turn up all the time in studies and surveys about beating depression. If it's winter, invest in a raincoat for everyone and get out amongst it.
- ★ Try exercising together as a family at a time when everyone is at home. Have a meal ready to heat up when you get back and go for a relaxing, debriefing walk. Or go with a friend.
- ★ Set very small goals and build up over months: today my special project is to shower, read a chapter of a book, go out for a drink with a pal without baby vomit on the back of my top, get away for a whole weekend, become prime minister. Once-a-week activities such as a martial arts class, a craft group or a walking club are also good to aim for – they're often more realistic than a daily routine early on. Once-a-month activities can include a reading group, a gardening club, filling in the details in the baby book – whatever takes your fancy.
- ★ Kid-free time is important for every full-time or part-time carer of kids. If your partner won't pull their weight, explain that you need them to do their share or you'll lose your mind and get carted off and then they'll be stuck with the lot.
- ★ Set yourself a regular session of your own time to do a class or hobby or to go out and kick up your heels: your partner or other babysitter will always

know that's the time they're needed. It could be a Friday night or a Monday morning.

- ★ If you don't have a relative or friend who can babysit for you, find another parent who can swap babysitting duties with you. You have permission to sleep, read a stupid magazine or a smart book, or go to a movie – don't do the housework or any other work.
- ★ Pick a hobby that has a meditative aspect, a team sport, a craft with a creative or intricate component – anything where you have to think about nothing but what you're doing for a while. Give your mind a holiday from humdrum stuff or worries.
- ★ Be careful of solitary, home-based crafts and pursuits that can increase your isolation. You might love them or you might be better off finding a hobby that involves making friends or staying in touch with old ones. Have some friends you talk to about children stuff and some other friends who aren't interested so you talk about different things.
- ★ If going out to dinner or a movie with your partner is too hard or you're always too tired, try a Sunday brunch.
- ★ See a 'cry-baby' film once a week. Most city and many suburban and country cinemas have daytime sessions for parents or other carers that they can take their babies to and nobody cares if a baby cries. This is harder if you have toddlers or preschoolers as well. And please be careful about choosing the movie; babies can be very sensitive to foreboding or loud music, unpleasant arguments and shouting, or your reactions to stressful emotions. *The Godfather Part III* is probably not a good idea. It's just more social to go out with other parents than to crouch in front of a DVD on your own.
- ★ Use the local paper, the city paper, free child magazines and your local council to find out what services and baby- or child-friendly free entertainment are available to you.
- ★ Formal or informal weekend events with other people who have kids will at least give you some time to sit down while someone else takes a turn pushing the swings.
- ★ A parent who is at work all day can set aside special times for the baby or kids, including a wake-up welcome-to-the-day ritual (you and the kid go outside, check the weather and the letterbox, inspect the garden, if you have one, or

trundle off round the corner to buy the day's milk), and an evening routine that involves perhaps some quiet play or a bath or story before bed.

- ★ Plan what to do with any spare time at home: do you love to read, just lie on the couch with a lamington and the TV guide or learn to rumba? Try to get into another room, the milking shed or the corner café away from the kids so you're out of sight, out of mind.

Avoiding resentment

If you feel like having a child is ruining your life, unruin it. What do you resent? What is it you'd love to be doing? What do you miss most? Work out what it is and a way to do it again. (If it's being a submariner, it may have to wait. Is there something else you could try, at least on Saturday mornings and Thursday nights?)

Ask other people what they do to help themselves cope better or cheer themselves up. And if you're having a really hard time and some stupid author on a website (ahem) suggests all these perky, impossible ideas that make you want to throw up, why not attack a queen-sized mattress with a cricket bat?



more info on reducing parental stress

relationships.com.au

Advice line: 1300 364 277

Relationships Australia is a federally funded non-profit organisation offering family counselling and courses nationwide.

raisingchildren.net.au

From the main page of this tip-top Aussie federally funded site, choose 'Grown-ups', then 'Looking after Yourself', then choose from 'Feeling Stressed', 'Coping with a Crisis', or anything else on the page that takes your fancy.

betterhealthchannel.com.au

From the main page of this Victorian Government health site choose 'Fact sheets – A-Z', then 'P' for 'Parenting – Issues . . . All About' for a helpful round-up of fact sheets.

Great Ideas for Tired Parents

by Michael Grose

A book with strategies for all sorts of difficult parenting and co-parenting problems, making time for yourself, and being confident enough not to care what other people think of your parenting.