



## EXTENSION

# SELF CARE IS VITAL FOR PARENTS EXPERIENCING DIVORCE

The experience of divorce can cause feelings of loss, grief, anxiety and anger. Some parents attempt to keep busy in order to avoid experiencing these negative feelings.

With so many changes going on, it is important for parents to find time for self care, even if it may feel impossible or selfish.

Katey Masri, coordinator for Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension's Co-Parenting for Resilience Program, said taking care of your own needs is one of the best gifts you can give your children.

"Investing in yourself means taking the time to care for yourself, to be a healthier version of you," Masri said. "Think of it as depositing money in the bank. Each time you do something for your physical, emotional or mental health, you're making a deposit into your self-care bank. In turn, your children will benefit, too."

Balancing your health is important and exercise is one of the easiest ways to quickly boost your mood. Exercising naturally produces positive hormones that lower stress and anxiety. It also boosts not only your physical health, but also emotional and mental health.

Masri said another important aspect of balancing your health is to maintain a well-balanced diet and get at least eight hours of adequate sleep.

"While you may simply want to lay low for a while, socializing can be very beneficial. Increase your positive feeling by joining a group of people with shared common interests," she said. "Consider signing up for a class or workshop to learn something new. It certainly can be easy to isolate yourself and allow negative emotions to take over, but socializing opportunities can counteract negative feelings and increase your emotional health."

Even under the best of circumstances, sometimes it can be hard to practice gratitude, which is the ability to find value and appreciation in the things you have, rather than focusing on what has been lost or what you simply do not have. Gratitude can be found in the most minute moments.

In fact, Masri said the more a person looks for gratitude, the more capable he or she becomes at recognizing it in everyday occurrences.

"Challenge yourself to find three different things every day for which you are grateful," she said. "It can be something as simple as enjoying the sun on your face as you walk from your car to your office. Get your children involved in this activity, too. Over dinner or as your children are getting ready for bed, discuss the things for which they're grateful. Expressing gratitude to others increases closeness and connection in relationships and has many positive mental health effects."

Going through a divorce is easily one of the most stressful situations a person can face. It can cause self-doubt and depression. To help combat these feelings consider trying mediation and mindfulness. There is not one right way to meditate and it does not take a lot of time, which is handy for parents with busy schedules.

Oftentimes, people are very compassionate to others, but it also is important to be compassionate to yourself. Treat yourself with the love and kindness you give others. The ability to truly love another person begins with the ability to truly love yourself.

Masri said parents going through a divorce will be busy juggling schedules and taking care of responsibilities, but try to find time for play.

"Play brings out your inner child and can bring joy and stress relief while building connections with your children," she said. "Also, challenge yourself to learn something new. Research shows learning increases optimism, the ability to cope with stress and improves self-esteem."



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You may think self care is time consuming, but here are a few things you can do in just 10 minutes or less.

- Dance – Turn on your favorite song and dance by yourself or have your children join in the fun.
- Start a compliment log – Write down the compliments other people give you. It can be a great reference when you are feeling low.
- Watch a funny video – Lighten your mood with a funny video on YouTube.
- Take a hot bath – A hot bath can help loosen up tight muscles and help you relax.
- Aromatherapy – Smelling something pleasant has positive physical and mental benefits.
- Cloud watch – Relax and watch the sky. Vitamin D from the sun is a good mood booster.
- Write a letter – Write a letter to yourself. What do you need to hear right now?
- Say something nice – Self-affirmations are free and take seconds. Look at yourself in the mirror and say something nice.
- Just breathe – Close your eyes, inhale in a deep breath through your nose, hold it a few seconds and release. Repeat several times.

“Remember, you want to be the best parent you can possibly be. Your children always will be your priority, but you need to be your best self, too,” Masri said.