

Parental Exhaustion

While raising children has never been an easy task, today's parents are being struck by the reality that modern-day parenting is depleting their energy stores quicker than ever before. For many, feeling tired would be a welcome respite from feeling the way they do – that being completely exhausted and wondering if parenting is supposed to be as hard and laborious as it is. It is not to say that these parents do not love their children or their parenting role. Instead their internal struggles stem from the constant strain parenting responsibilities and tasks put on their capacity to put one foot in front of the other. This article will therefore look at the signs of parental exhaustion, address some common reasons for its prevalence, as well as identify ways to nurture oneself to avoid parental burnout.

What is parental exhaustion?

Parental exhaustion refers to the negative impacts of parenting. The time and effort put into 24/7 parenting often leaves many parents feeling like they are always on hyper-drive, tending to the needs of others without getting opportunities to destress, unwind and relax themselves. When parents continuously ignore and/or cannot tend to their own need for restoration, parental exhaustion can result.

Parental exhaustion probably has a few common names, two alternatives which include parental depletion and parental burnout. The reasons for parental exhaustion are not reduced to a simple few. In fact, it is fair to say that the moment a woman conceives, pregnancy starts a ripple effect. While women often feel the sometimes negative effects of child-rearing earlier than men, it is not to say that men are immune to parental exhaustion.

A lack of sleep is commonly thought of as a contributing cause for parental exhaustion, especially when adults become new parents. Too often, people offer platitudes, reassuring new parents that once “the baby” gets into a sleep routine that things will improve. Sadly, for many, this is not the case. Instead, parenting demands typically intensify as the child gets older, for example, children have parties, playdates, extracurricular activities, etc. that they regularly attend.

The effects of parental exhaustion

Parental exhaustion often leaves parents suffering multiple symptoms, none of which make the ongoing demands of parenting easier. Symptoms include increased stress levels, problems retaining or recalling information/poor memory, poor sleep habits (despite feeling like one might be able to sleep forever), depression, wanting to distance oneself from their children and others, decreased libido, hormonal changes, lower levels of patience, becoming withdrawn, behaviour changes and many more.

Unfortunately, parental exhaustion does not affect adults in one way. Instead, it can become a condition which impacts their emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing. The result of parental exhaustion often leaves parents feeling like they have nothing left to give, all the while trying to figure out how they are going to get over the colossal wave of expectations still being placed upon them by their children, others and even themselves.

Why is parental exhaustion as prolific as it is?

Modern-day society has perhaps unwittingly developed a world in which the expectations on parents supersedes anything previous generations have experienced before. A few generations back, parents were just parents, left to their own devices to muddle through the often muddy waters of child-rearing. While there was always a general expectation that parents should do right by their children, parents were not bombarded by beliefs that they need to be perfect, give their children every minute of their spare time or leave them wanting for anything. Additionally, there was not the world of Facebook and other social media platforms at the ready to name and shame parents who did not meet the expectations of strangers.

The ideals of raising a happy and healthy family has become subject to the idea that children need to be involved in activities every other day if not every day of the week. This belief means parents are shuttling their children around their community and (sometimes many kilometers/miles) beyond to make sure their children do not miss out. Taking away the time constraints such efforts place on parents, the ripple effect fans out, touching finances, increasing everyone's exhaustion levels and thus impacting families at a deeper level. While it may seem obvious, many people overlook the impact stress and tiredness have on family dynamics. It does not take a plethora of research to back up

the understanding that the more tired we are the less capable we are of sustaining healthy relationships, communicating in times of stress and managing our emotions in positive ways.

In years gone by, parents spent varying amounts of time playing with and conversing with their children. While there is no suggestion that past generations always got the balance correct, today, parents frequently report that they spend an enormous portion of their day talking to and playing with their children. This type of care is terrific for children as it is not surprising that the more one-on-one time they have with adults, the more their cognitive, language, emotional and physical development is nurtured. The not so good news is that parents suffer at the hands of their own efforts.

Who are the winners?

Parents can often sustain their efforts to be the best parents they can be for quite a long time – usually long past the initial stages of exhaustion set in; however, the ripple effect widens once parents continue to push past their limits in an effort to not let children (and their own expectations) down. When the threshold of exhaustion is exceeded, parents can become less engaged (despite their best efforts) because they cannot physically sustain a level of presence the child might be accustomed to. As previously mentioned, when tired, it is more challenging to fight impulses of frustration and anger, thus meaning that tensions within a household (between adults and children and adults and other adults) can increase discord. Generating momentum off the back of these factors is resentment. Adults become resentful for the lack of thanks and support they often get. With this thought in mind, it seems that the only winners are those who have the foresight to notice the symptoms of exhaustion/burnout and change course before it is too late.

Identifying the symptoms of exhaustion/burnout

Exhaustion/burnout is often very difficult to spot when you are the one experiencing the symptoms. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the symptoms because if change is not enacted those suffering exhaustion will likely face a long road to recovery. Following is an outline of the five stages of burnout.

Stage one: *The honeymoon phase* – This phase aligns with the time in one's life where something in life encourages a person to show initiative and strive to achieve. For many parents it is about being the best and always making themselves available to their children, tending to their children's needs and managing a household. Even when parents are able to identify moments where children could be self-sufficient, they may push themselves to go the extra mile to make sure they feel and look like they are doing the best they can. In this stage, parents may start to feel the build-up of stress. To avoid falling into phase two of burnout, parents should consider tending to their own wellbeing and needs, ensuring that they undertake activities and ventures that allow them to revitalise and renew their energy stores as much as everyone else's.

Stage Two: *The onset of stress* – One of the common signs of this stage is the feeling that some days are more difficult than others. The thriving sense of optimism that once existed has begun to chip away, making it harder to sustain a positive mindset. When parents begin to experience this phase they will become more aware of the negative symptoms of burnout. These may include anxiety, avoidance, fatigue, a shift in eating habits, headaches, withdrawing from social outings and high blood pressure. This list is not complete. During this phase, parents may notice a shift in the way they converse with their children and how things that they were once able to handle are now less easy. Similarly, they may begin to complain about not having enough help or time. Tensions typically rise and the number of household arguments and child tantrums may increase.

Stage three: *Chronic stress* – This phase is typical of individuals experiencing stress at increased levels. Previous symptoms are usually experienced on a larger, more intense scale. Accompanying those symptoms are a sense of powerlessness, a loss of control, feelings of incompetence and failure (despite successes), frequent illness, increased aggression, resentment, negativity and a growing sense of being depressed. During this phase parents may withdraw and find activities that help them to escape the toll of family life (e.g. increased use of technology) and/or chronic tiredness. Adding caffeine and alcohol and drugs to routines may occur. During this phase children will start to notice a dramatic change in the parent's behaviour. While they may not understand what is happening, children's behaviour may begin to change, often for the worse.

Stage four: *Burnout* – This phase is literally when burnout begins. Day-to-day life becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible. All activities and responsibilities become a chore and simply getting out of bed is a challenge. The impacts of burnout on children is a given. They find themselves less engaged with parents and will seek out attention, not always in positive ways.

Stage five: *Habitual burnout* – Those reaching this stage experience negative effects to their psychological and physical wellbeing. Where the body was able to once respond to stress and then return to a balance state, individuals in this stage will not be able to find equilibrium. In this phase, individuals are typically diagnosed with chronic burnout, chronic fatigue syndrome, clinical depression and experience a loss of joy towards everything in life. Parents in this phase will find it very difficult to engage with their children and tend to the child's needs. The impacts on children can range from children becoming the parent's carer to children becoming unruly and seeking out company and attention in the wrong places and ways.

Preventing exhaustion/burnout

Only parents are able to identify the things in their life that can be altered to ensure that they do not fall victim to the latter stages of burnout. By shifting some of the expectations parents place on themselves, they are able to gain a more realistic perspective of what they can and cannot achieve. In short, perfection is not possible nor is making sure that their children have a euphoric childhood devoid of want and need. Taking a step back to evaluate routines and extracurricular activities can help parents identify what activities are essential to a child's wellbeing and which are time fillers. Learning to say no to children and teaching them to self-entertain can be an important skill, something which is identified in the article 'Teaching Boredom'. Finally, but not exclusively, parents wishing to avoid parental exhaustion may benefit by knowing what activities and things nurture them. Making time for these activities is extremely important and something that should be addressed (despite the parental guilt that often tries to voice its objections).

Summing it up

Parental exhaustion refers to the physical and mental effects the parenting role has on individuals. Other names for this condition include parental depletion and parental burnout. The symptoms parents experience due to parental exhaustion are many, all of which impact the parent's capacity to support and nurture their own and their family's long-term wellbeing. Parents tend to push themselves to be the best parents they can, always making sure that children do not miss out on things and/or their time. The outcome of such monumental efforts increases parents' stress levels and ultimately effects the health of the individual. When parents push themselves without considering their own health and wellbeing, they run the risk of burning out. There are five stages of burnout, the final two of which can impair a parent's ability to function at a normal level. Unfortunately, reaching these last stages of burnout is not quickly repaired. In order to avoid parental exhaustion, parents should consider taking a step back from their and their family's busy schedules to see if every activity, adventure and outing they undertake is necessary. Similarly, parents should take time to ensure that the activities they embark on give them, as well as the littlest members of the household, opportunities to recharge and relax.

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