

Why self-care is an important part of parenting, and how to make time for it



In traditional ground-fought wars, the command post behind the lines would often have hot coffee, good food and dry clothes. Was this because the generals were selfish? Or because they deserved it for having made the highest ranks in the military?

No, it was because if the command fell or experienced low morale, the rest of the troops, and indeed the entire war effort, would be in jeopardy. Those leaders making critical decisions needed to be at their best.

Now think of that in terms of parenting. Parents are the generals of their household. How do you, in particular those who stay at home with children, feel day after day, hour after hour, with no real break in sight? Is your coffee hot and clothing dry? Probably not.

If that continues, how do you think your troops at home will fare? Not well, if

you're not well. Self-care is not selfish; it's one of the best things you can do for your kids. Taking a break from family can cause guilt and anxiety in mothers and fathers alike. But a few hours away can re-energize you so you can get back to playing with Legos, making dinner and taking care of everyone else.

“Maintaining the basic day-to-day with no extraordinary circumstances, keeping all those balls in the air, is a really demanding endeavor, and it leaves very little time for moms to be able to have fun, relax, rest and have downtime,” says Aimee Danielson, director of the Women’s Mental Health Program at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital in the District.

Being on and at the ready for your children at all times can cause burnout and make things that could be everyday treasures feel like everyday chores. That’s why it’s important that all parents start taking real, regular days off. This could mean asking a spouse to take the day off from an office job and be with the kids, or asking a family member to cover you for a day. Maybe it involves hiring a sitter. One friend of mine and her husband take days off from work together to go golfing while their son is in school. Whatever you need to do, make it happen.

I experimented with this idea last summer after listening to a podcast on discouragement and burnout. In my house, we juggle a lot. I stay home with a curious 2-year-old and a vivacious 4-year-old who has attention-deficit/-hyperactivity disorder, and I write during their naps and after bedtime. My husband often works nights and weekends, plus he’s in the U.S. Army Reserves drilling one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer. He has deployed once, and we know he could deploy again at any time.

I told my husband I was going to start taking one day off a month from being a full-time stay-at-home, part-time work-at-home mom. For my first day off, I drove an hour away, with a new CD blasting, to explore a new town and do a little shopping.

The next month, my cousin visited, and we got away for some dancing. I felt much too old and tired for this, but she reminded me of how much I enjoy getting silly on the dance floor. One month, I skipped my day off, because my husband had a month-long work assignment out of town — but in retrospect, that’s when I needed it most.

In fact, Danielson says that the times when parents need self-care the most — maybe they’re experiencing a spouse’s deployment, a death, a divorce — are often when it slips. “When you add that additional component . . . the account runs down to zero, and then there’s nothing there. That puts women at risk for developing mental-health issues: depression, anxiety, insomnia.” So before you take a day off or a girls’ night out, Danielson said, focus on sleeping, eating well and moving your body. “You’re the linchpin to the whole family working,” she says.

So when a parent takes a day off, what should they do? Try to think about what will be restorative. Maybe try on clothes for an upcoming season without little hangers-on rushing your decision process. Maybe get in a good workout and then relax in sneakers at a coffee shop where you can read a fun book. Or maybe schedule lunch and a spa day with a close friend.

Errands day this is not. Finding a dry cleaner for your winter boots or a plumber for that leak in the basement can wait (although I do find I enjoy leisurely picking up groceries on my way back home, when I can browse the aisles).

Studies show that the anticipation of vacation can bring just as much psychological reward as the actual vacation. Shane Lopez, a Gallup senior scientist and author of [“Making Hope Happen,”](#) calls this “nexting.” Knowing that relief and rest are coming keeps parents energized for today’s puppet shows and snack times, tumbles and sibling tussles.

Genevieve Shaw Brown is a mom of three and a reporter for ABC News in New York. At one point, she realized that she fed her kids better than herself,

as she details in her new book, ["The Happiest Mommy You Know: Why Putting Your Kids First Is the Last Thing You Should Do."](#)

"You can't just think, 'Someday soon I'm going to take a day for myself,' " she says. "We have to prioritize the same as we would prioritize things for our kids. We'd never miss an appointment for our kids, because they are important. Equally important is prioritizing yourself and your own needs."

To feel even better about this new practice, remember that it's not only about enjoying activities you used to like before having kids; it's also about regrouping on a higher level. It's a good time to take a 30,000-foot view of your life and think about what changes might need to be made.

For 2016, a friend and I laid out our responsibilities in stay-at-home-mom job descriptions, and we've been tweaking them ever since, looking for things to cut and things to add that would benefit us, our kids and our household. Days off are when I think about such things.

I fall into the trap all the time of thinking that I'm not loving my kids when I'm apart from them. But the truth is, I get worn out. I lose the energy to play with them. The thought of another walk around the neighborhood to look for bugs bores me. Worse, I start snapping at them just for doing childlike, age-appropriate things. (Looking at you, snuggly toddler who won't leave my arms.)

"The question I ask moms is, 'If you were choosing a child-care provider, and you had a choice between someone who seemed stressed, tired and overwhelmed versus someone who seemed rested, contented, happy and healthy, who would you want for your kids?' " Danielson says. "If you can't do it for yourself, do it for your kids."

Five great ideas to re-energize

- **Say no.** You'll have less energy taken from you in the first place if you learn

to set limits. “Say no to things that don’t serve you,” Aimee Danielson says. “Say yes to things that are fulfilling and replenishing.” For instance, it’s okay to say no to another volunteer task at school but yes to a nice dinner out with a friend you enjoy.

- **Get counseling.** It’s never too early to get counseling, whether it’s for a long-term issue or something happening just at that moment in your parenting life.

- **Pick up a new hobby.** Take a knitting or cooking class. Maybe you’ve always wanted to try taekwondo? What a great example you’ll set for your kids by trying something new.

On Parenting newsletter

The issues and ideas shaping parenting today.

- **Set a goal.** Having a long-term goal, such as running a 10-miler, forces you to make time for practice each week. Those appointments with yourself will replenish you.

- **Ask for alone time in the house.** “There are some women who really feel like what they need is solitude,” Danielson says, noting that extroverts and introverts need different things to feel refreshed. “They need to be in their house by themselves.”

- **Take time with your partner.** Genevieve Shaw Brown and her husband try to get away for two days at a time when they can. And if they can’t, they’ll at least try to meet each other for lunch in the middle of a workday. “We’re able to focus on each other . . . and have a meal sitting down,” she says. Breaks with a parenting partner are often overlooked, but their value is frequently underestimated. Your kids need it, and you need it.

More from [Lifestyle](#):

[Learning from our mistakes, for kids and ourselves](#)

Is it possible to be both an ethical and a good parent?

When married moms say to single ones: 'I don't know how you do it'

Most marches on Washington are about politics. The Women's March was about parenting, too.

The device dilemma: What rules should parents have for smartphones and tablets?