

Here's what I learned about parenting with major depression

I made sure that I took care of my daughter and that all her needs were met, but I wasn't taking care of myself.

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By Danielle Hayden

I was just 11 when I had my first experience with depression. I was feeling alienated at a new school and had body image issues, which were exacerbated by my parents' divorce. Since then, I have dealt with despondency in cycles. When I experienced heartbreak, a layoff or a friendship breakup, it affected me in ways that could interfere with my ability to function in my day-to-day life.

When I became a mother, things only got more complicated. I didn't want to worry my daughter Aria, now 8, but I also didn't want to suppress my emotions. (I grew up in a household that discouraged showing too much emotion or crying.) But even when I tried to hide my feelings, my daughter would sometimes ask, "Why are you sad, Mama?" When she expressed concern about my well-being — a burden no child should have to bear — it made me feel even worse.

I also felt guilty for not always having the energy to play with her and my inability to complete tasks. I made sure her needs were met, but I wasn't taking care of myself. What kind of example was I setting walking around in a bathrobe and a bird's nest hairstyle for the third day in a row?

My child is as close to perfect as they come: Sweet. Fun. Obedient. Easy. What right did I have to be sad? But that's not how depression works. Regardless of how charmed a person's life can seem, anyone can experience sadness that can feel like too much to bear.

While people are becoming better at recognizing and getting help for those with postpartum anxiety or depression, the conversation doesn't always extend to mood disorders that existed before and after having a baby. We, too, are in the trenches, but for different reasons. Although depression can make you feel incredibly isolated, you are not alone — according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 1 in 5 adults experience depression at some point in their lives.

I talked to experts as well as other people who are navigating parenthood and major depressive disorder. Here's their advice.

1. Tell your children what's going on

Although it is natural to want to protect your children, it's best to be open and honest with them, rather than trying to hide what's happening, the experts said. "Parents sometimes don't say anything because they don't know what to say or [are] afraid of upsetting their kids," said Michelle Sherman, a board-certified couple and family psychologist and co-author of the book "Loving Someone With a Mental Illness or History of Trauma," which she co-wrote with her mother. "But then if you do research with kids who've grown up with a parent with mental illness, oftentimes they wish someone had told them."

With an absence of communication, children might make assumptions that are worse than the reality. Of course, you should only share information that is age-appropriate, Sherman said.

For Diana Warth, 40, talking to her daughter about depression was unavoidable. "I actually went to a private treatment facility at the end of December 2023 and so I was away from her for three weeks," she said. Her daughter was 5 at the time, and Warth's partner simply told her that her mother was sad and needed to go to the doctor to feel better. "She understands that now," Warth said.

Here are a few more tips based on my own experiences and what experts often advise:

- Assure your child that they are not to blame for what's happening.
- Let them know they're not responsible for a parent's emotions or angry outbursts.
- Try to speak with them calmly and with kindness.
- If you do lose your temper (anger can be a symptom of depression), apologize and try to curtail such expressions in the future.

2. Get help

After years away from therapy, I restarted when my daughter was an infant and continued until she was about 6. I saw three different therapists during that time. Once I found the right one, she helped me talk through my issues and offered perspectives that I had not considered before.

If you can't find a therapist or can't afford one, look for lower-cost or community-based treatment. Open Path Collective or Therapist.com's directory (which has a sliding scale option) are good places to find professionals in your area.

3. Take care of yourself, as best you can

If you have depression, it can be challenging to just take care of your child and yourself, but choosing healthier food and exercising may help you feel better physically and emotionally. It's not in everyone's budget, but I did find that meal kits were a big help when my daughter was very young. Meal prepping can also save time and effort.

Exercise releases endorphins and may help boost your mood and ease depressive symptoms. "When you're depressed, that's the last thing you want to do. It's the very last, and it's the thing you should do the most," said Melanie Mullinax, a mom who developed depression and PTSD after a car accident.

"Self-care is not selfish," Joanne Nicholson, a clinical and research psychologist and professor at Brandeis University, said in an email.

That applies to any caregiver, including fathers. "If they are feeling down or blue or think something is off in terms of their mental health, getting the help they need is what is going to help their family the most," Craig Garfield, an attending physician at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and a professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, said in an email.

4. Make a plan

While you are busy planning family meals, play dates, and dentist and doctor's visits, don't forget to also have a system in place for the next time you're feeling low, said Nicholson, who is also the author of the 2001 book "Parenting Well When You're Depressed: A Complete Resource for Maintaining a Healthy Family." Nicholson explains that being proactive takes energy, which depressed people often lack. But if you know the signs that you might be struggling, you can better prepare for the future.

Enlist your partner or another trusted friend or family member to be someone you — or your child — can turn to as you manage your mood.

"It can be a grandparent, it can be a neighbor, it can be your partner or husband," Nicholson said.

5. Make time for yourself

While part of depression is losing interest in the world around you, you can also end up so busy organizing birthday parties, taking kids to soccer games or helping with homework that you forget to even consider doing things that can bring you joy. Think about the things that make you feel happier (or have always wanted to try).

While sometimes nothing can lift your mood, some of these ideas may be worth trying: Spend time in nature, or try to relax at home with a craft project and music in the background. There are also thousands of podcasts specifically dedicated to mental health across platforms such as Spotify and Apple.

6. Celebrate your wins

When you are depressed, sometimes all you think about are perceived failures. But what if you kept a strength journal, the way that people keep gratitude journals, amassing a collection of successes, no matter how small?

Nicholson encourages people to keep track of what they are doing well, helping to rebuild their confidence and capacity to do better. She ultimately hopes that no matter what we are going through, we can give ourselves some grace.

These days, I still experience occasional feelings of woe, but I keep myself from being consumed by despair. I focus more on gratitude — not by pretending to appreciate or ignoring what's truly bad, but by reorienting my thoughts toward what is good. I also try to remain hopeful, shift my focus to more outward pursuits and, yes, give myself a little grace in the process.

What readers are saying

The comments emphasize the importance of open communication with children about mental health, highlighting both positive and negative impacts. Many commenters share personal experiences of growing up with parents who had mental health issues, noting that a lack of communication... [Show more](#)

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