

Children and Domestic Violence

A Parent's Self-Care and Self-Reflection

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#10** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

It can be hard to think about yourself when you're dealing with domestic violence and doing your best as a parent. It helps if you remember that you are the most important person in your children's lives and the biggest influence on how they respond to stress. If you don't take care of yourself, both your body and mind, you will have less to give your kids in the way of guidance and support. Being able to cope with your own stress is good for you and your children.

SIZING UP STRESS IN YOUR LIFE

All of us face stresses in our lives. Some stresses are temporary and some actually help us perform better. But stress that you feel over and over again—chronic stress—can take a toll on your health and well-being. Your body has a harder time calming down. You may find yourself with sleep problems, irritability, or poor memory. Over time, chronic stress may lead to heart disease, weight gain, weakened immunity, and unhealthy behaviors like smoking or heavy drinking.

Self-care during stressful times means different things for different people. But whatever your plan, your self-care time should always take place where you feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Consider contacting a domestic violence program to help reduce the risk of harm if you are still in an abusive relationship. When you feel safe, set aside time to ask yourself some questions about stress in your life.



The Co-chairs of the NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group Betsy Groves, Miriam Berkman, Rebecca Brown, and Edwina Reyes along with members of the committee and Futures Without Violence developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women's advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

My Stress Audit

How is my body feeling today?

Am I often tired or exhausted?

Do I have a problem that could be stress-related?

Am I having trouble concentrating?

Have I become more short-tempered or irritable than I used to be?

Am I overeating or not eating healthy food?

Am I smoking, or drinking too much?

Did you answer "yes" to any of the questions? Becoming aware of how stress affects you is often the first step toward taking better care of yourself. Use your answers to begin to make a plan.

A PLAN THAT WORKS FOR YOU

There are many effective methods for stress relief and self-care. Think about how you have coped with stress in the past, recalling what helped you and what didn't. Breathing exercises, meditation, visualization (imagining and focusing on a soothing image), listening to music, exercising, praying—each of these activities has been shown to lower blood pressure and stimulate hormones that help us relax. By practicing them you are taking care of your physical health as well as your emotional health.

Twelve Things I Can Do to Relieve Stress

Connect with others

Enjoy a cup of tea or coffee

Take a hot bath or shower

Listen to music

Create artwork

Watch a good movie

Say a prayer

Take a walk

Breathe deeply

Exercise

Meditate

Join a support group

Remember that each of us is different. What will work for one person may not work for another. If you are in the midst of domestic violence, it may be especially hard for you to self-reflect or make a self-care plan. Ask yourself which activities would help you feel stronger and more centered even if you have only a few minutes to devote to them. Then make a pledge that you will do one or two of these activities regularly. No matter what your situation is, try to do something for yourself every day.

Two Things I Can Do to Take Better Care of Myself

1. _____

2. _____

Check your pledge in two weeks to see how you are doing. Do you want to try a new activity? Replace one? Pay attention to how you are feeling, and take care not to become overwhelmed with your activities. Try a variety of ways to find the ones that work best for you.

And don't forget to take a moment to focus on the positive aspects of your day and your life, beginning with an acknowledgement of what you have done so far to increase safety for yourself and your children.