

The Impact of a Child's Mental Health on a Doctor-Parent

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As a physician, you know the signs and symptoms of mental health issues and understand the impact it can have on a person's life. However, when it is your own child who is struggling with mental health challenges, it can be much more daunting to manage. You may feel guilty or responsible for your child's struggles, and this stress and worry can affect your own well-being.



The demands of your job as a physician can also present barriers to providing the support your child needs. Long hours, working weekends and being on call can make it hard to attend appointments or spend quality time with your child. There can be a level of stress and perceived stigmatization attached to having your child evaluated by colleagues within your work organization. Privacy may feel invaded, despite good efforts to provide a safe, HIPPA-compliant environment. We only want the best for our children when they are suffering, so when one knows the inner workings of the healthcare organization, delays in assessment and treatment can lead to attempts to “work the system” and circumvent the usual patient protocols for evaluation. This type of behavior may impair the relationship with the child's provider and undermine your well-being too. Put simply, a mental health issue with your child reaches new levels of complexity when you are a physician-parent advocating for them within the healthcare system, all while continuing to work *and* trying to mitigate your own distress related to the situation.

I remember when I was a young mom and my middle daughter was eight she developed school anxiety after being physically jumped on by another child at school. Despite the best efforts of the teachers to protect her from this child, the situation only escalated, such that she developed difficulties sleeping and a school phobia. My husband, who is also a physician, and I reached out to our pediatrician-friend who referred her to a psychologist.

After several sessions of cognitive behavioral therapy there was some slight improvement in our daughter's anxiety, but the fear of going to school was still an issue. We advocated for her safety with the school administration and ultimately the psychologist referred us to psychiatry because our daughter's anxiety was becoming more generalized. We were told it would be two months for the appointment and she was placed on the waiting list.

During that time, the level of stress I carried with me daily, as a mother, was excessive. **My daughter was constantly on my mind and I found myself anxious to get home to see how her day had gone.** I did not want to manipulate the system to get her seen more quickly, because I felt I would be viewed as being entitled. When we received a call there was a last-minute appointment available one Friday afternoon, my husband and I cancelled our afternoon clinics, picked her up from school and brought her to the appointment. We were feeling desperate and overwhelmed. The provider was kind, thorough and helpful. We elected to try a new strategy for the next few months and thankfully our daughter's anxiety resolved. As she improved, our well-being improved.

It was a trying time, during which we continued to serve our patients and tried our best to be present at work. Carrying the additional load of worry when your child is suffering is not easy. In retrospect, I wish I would have been more transparent about the challenges we were facing and reached out for additional moral support from

my friends and colleagues. If I had known there was support for myself in the midst of this trial, it would have helped me cope more easily. Now, as a coach, who *has* a coach, I know there are many successful ways to mitigate life's challenges that will preserve my well-being while making me more present for my family and patients.

Tips for coping

If you are a doctor-parent of a child facing mental health struggles, there are strategies to help manage the stress and support your child.

Seek professional support

As a physician, you know the importance of connecting your patients to mental health professionals; why should it be any different when it comes to the needs of your own child and even yourself. VITAL WorkLife offers Parent Coaching through your Employee Assistance Program or Physician Well-Being Resources at no additional cost. Therapy or counseling can also provide you with the tools you need to develop coping strategies to manage your stress and anxiety, and can help you problem-solve and identify what it is that your child needs as well.

Prioritize self-care

It can be easy to put your own needs on the back burner when you are dealing with the stress of having a child with mental health issues. However, it is essential to prioritize your own self-care. This can include prioritizing down-time, unplugging from technology and practicing gratitude. Self-care is a choice. As physicians and parents we are used to putting our own needs last. To choose, even occasionally, to pour into our own well-being, is not selfish, but an act of kindness that will not only benefit yourself, but those you care about as well.

Connect with other parents

Joining a support group or online community for parents of children with mental health concerns can be incredibly helpful. Connecting with other parents who are going through similar challenges can provide a sense of hope and similarity in a time that can feel very isolating. There is a degree of vulnerability that must be overcome when we choose to reach out. We share a common humanity and knowing that others have similar experiences can be stress-relieving.

Set boundaries

You may tend to take on more than you can reasonably handle. However, having a child with additional needs and challenges makes it essential to set boundaries and make time for yourself and your family. This may mean saying no to additional shifts or setting limits on work-related activities. Physicians, by nature, are terrible at setting boundaries. Choosing to set boundaries is an act of self-compassion. By understanding and honoring your own needs in the moment you expand your bandwidth and set yourself up for greater success in meeting the needs of others.

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation or yoga, can be helpful in managing stress and anxiety. Taking a few minutes each day to practice mindfulness can help you stay grounded and focused, even when things feel overwhelming. Being mindful of our own negative thoughts and tendencies to ruminate can be the first step in improving well-being. Remembering we are human first, with emotions, feelings, and a body that holds tension and stress, rather than just a physician-brain-on-a-stick can help us reconnect to our surroundings and those we care about most. [Check out our Mindfulness Mondays](#) series with helpful strategies to employ mindfulness daily.

We Can Help

Parent Coaching for you and Counseling for you and for your child is available as part of your VITAL WorkLife resources. Contact us at **877.731.3949**, through the **VITAL WorkLife App** or [online](#) today to learn more and start the road to better mental health—for you and your child(ren).

Don't have our solutions yet? [A study](#) published in an American Medical Association journal reported the number of children ages 3-17 years diagnosed with anxiety grew by 29 percent and those with depression by 27 percent from 2016 to 2020. You know doctor-parents with their children on their mind can affect your bottom line. [We'd love to discuss](#) your organizational well-being needs.