

### **Taking Care of Yourself in the Hospital**

Many parents have a hard time taking time for themselves in the hospital. They may feel guilty leaving their child even briefly and/or they may be afraid they will miss a doctor visiting the room. Many parents miss exercising but cannot figure out how to work out at the facility. Other parents may miss a more solitary mind- calming activity like reading, meditating, or praying but find it hard to find a place or time to do these things. But remember that neglecting to take care of yourself is a recipe for burnout.

What has helped you relieve tension in the past? Exercise? Venting? Meditation? Writing? Listening to or playing music? Taking breaks? Think about how you can access these activities in the hospital. If you need a break, ask someone to come in and relieve you for an hour or so each day. If you need to vent, talk to a psychosocial staff member or with friends on the telephone (outside your child's room). If you want to meet other parents, there is often a weekly group for parents in the hospital where you can share your reactions, questions, and ideas. A nurse or psychosocial clinician will tell you when and where it meets. Some parents are helped by writing— on a website, in a journal, or by emailing friends.

Consider if any of the steps below would make taking time for yourself easier:

Remind yourself that the better the physical and mental shape you are in, the better able you will be to deal with what is going on. If you are able to exercise or spend some peaceful time by yourself, you are likely to return to your child's hospital room in a better mood and frame of mind than when you left. If you do not feel able to take a long break, even a few minutes away can help.

If you are worried about leaving your child alone, arrange for a relative, friend, or volunteer to come at the same time each day or for a few days each week. Or ask your child's nurse to check on her more frequently than usual and tell your child she can call you if she needs to. You can also see that she is doing something she enjoys when you leave. Be quite specific about when you will be back and always let your child or her nurse know if you are delayed.

An interactive good-bye ritual for a young child can be helpful. Try whatever method for saying good- bye that you used at home or develop a special hospital sequence. For example, use the same sequence of good- bye kisses each time or even the same rhyme:

Parent: See you later, alligator.

Child: In a while, crocodile.

If you are worried about missing the doctor, go at a time when the doctor is unlikely to come—say, after morning rounds—or leave your cell phone number with your child's nurse.

### **WAYS TO SQUEEZE IN A LITTLE EXERCISE**

Make sure the clothes you are comfortable exercising in are with you in the hospital.

Find attractive places to walk or jog. Perhaps the hospital information desk can suggest options. Ask if there is a room in the hospital or an adjoining building where you could exercise should it be too cold to exercise outside. A few hospitals may be affiliated with a gym.

Walk up the stairs rather than taking the elevator.

Ask if your hospital offers dropin exercise groups.

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Ask if there is a place where you can form a yoga group or simply do yoga exercises by yourself each morning.

### **TIME BY YOURSELF— TO READ, TO MEDITATE, TO PRAY**

Find a peaceful place in the hospital where you can go. Some hospitals have nondenominational chapels, others have gardens, others have a communal area for activities or even waiting areas with comfortable chairs.

Ignore other people who may be passing by or sitting near you. (You may need to bring earphones in case other people's conversations distract you.)

Give yourself permission to do whatever it is that gives your mind a break and your spirit comfort— be it reading, meditating, praying, listening to music, or even taking a nap away from your child's hospital room.

### **Hydration and Healthy Eating**

Eating and drinking adequately are key ingredients for mental and physical health. Eating or drinking healthfully is a challenge in the hospital. Many parents find it easier to drink than to eat. Unfortunately, coffee (with high caffeine) and sodas (with high calorie and sugar content) are usually the drinks most easily available. Most people are aware that we all should drink much more water than we do. It's easy to get distracted in the hospital and to forget to drink enough water, resulting in mild dehydration, which can make you tired and hazy. At least try to add two or three glasses of water to your daily intake. Medical staff generally prefer you go outside the hospital if you want to have an alcoholic drink, and are likely to ask you to leave the hospital if you appear intoxicated.

Many parents have a hard time eating regular meals or eating at all in the hospital. They will often nibble off the tray of food ordered for their child, and that will constitute their food intake for the day. Parents say it is hard for them to eat because:

They don't feel like eating (they are too worried).

They do not have much appetite because they are sitting around all day.

They do not want to leave their child alone while they get food.

The food costs too much.

The food is not good anyway.

Occasionally parents will say they are eating more than usual. They even may be putting on weight in the hospital. All of these are understandable reactions, but they are not good for you or your child.

So how can you persuade yourself to eat healthy food regularly because this will keep you in good shape?

Remind yourself that it is important to eat regularly and well regardless whether you feel hungry or not.

Start with one healthy meal a day when you go down to the cafeteria. Select a nutritious option and either eat the meal there or take it back to your child's room.

If the cost of the food is an issue, check whether the hospital has any free meal vouchers for parents. Often there are discounts even if there are no vouchers for patients' families.

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If it is the taste of the food you dislike, ask friends or family to bring in some home-cooked food. Most hospitals have a refrigerator where patients' food can be kept. Make sure it is clearly labeled and dated, or it may be thrown out by the cleaning staff.

### **Smoking**

If you are a regular smoker, this can be very challenging. Many parents point out that they smoke to relieve stress and provide comfort and this is hardly the moment to give up smoking. Hospitals have understood this, and our hospital tried various methods over the years to discourage but not forbid parents to smoke. First, smoking was banned from all areas of the hospital except for a special parents' smoking room situated near the cafeteria. However, the smoke-filled atmosphere and congested space was so clearly unhealthy that a special outdoor space was instead allocated where parents could smoke. Many hospitals have experimented with versions of this approach.

However, you are placed in a tricky position. Even young children are aware of a connection between smoking and cancer, and your child will have a hard time understanding how you can do something that increases your own risk of cancer while expecting her to get extremely unpleasant treatment to ensure she gets rid of the cancer in her body. She may well lobby you to give up smoking. So what can you do?

Perhaps the most straightforward approach is to say you will try to give up smoking—and try. You can investigate some of the programs described later and see if there is one that is home-based, perhaps app-based, that appeals to you. If you suspect that at the moment you will not be able to give up smoking completely because of the stress relief it provides, then can you commit to your child that you will try to cut down on the number of cigarettes you smoke each day? The inconvenience and frequent discomfort of having to go outside to smoke and the fact of having to leave your child to do so may make this easier. You can even keep track of the numbers to show her you are trying and making some progress. If you are not progressing, you can tell her you will try again when things are calmer.

### **Getting Better Sleep**

Adequate sleep is another key ingredient for mental and physical health. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for many parents to get much sleep in the hospital. So what can help?

Exercise during the day or take a short walk before going to sleep.

Listen to music or a relaxation app on your cell phone or iPod.

Use earplugs and an eye mask.

Bring in a white-noise machine.

Even if you do not sleep well, you can give yourself some down time when you let your mind and body rest. Often parents say they want to be alert and easily awoken to be sure their child is all right, but let's remember it is the nurse's job to check on your child every few hours. A good night's sleep will help you think more clearly and feel less emotionally vulnerable.