

# WELLNESSMONTHLY

Managing the Stresses of Parenthood | **October 2024**



The U.S. Surgeon General has called for a fundamental shift in how Americans prioritize the well-being of parents.

## Managing the Stresses of Parenthood

*[Parents Under Pressure](#), the U.S. Surgeon General's recently issued advisory on the mental health and well-being of parents and caregivers, draws attention to a public health crisis affecting millions of Americans who are struggling to cope.*

It has never been easy to raise children. However, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, M.D., M.B.A., the father of two, reports that the current generation of parents is experiencing significantly higher levels of acute and prolonged stress when compared to adults who are not raising kids. (Caregivers are defined as those who provide caretaking for a child under 18.) The Surgeon General's report cites a 2023 American Psychological Association survey in which:

- 33 percent of responding parents said they felt highly stressed, compared to 20 percent of the general population

- 48 percent of parents rated their level of stress as completely overwhelming on most days, compared to 26 percent of the general population.

"In addition to the traditional challenges of parenting – protecting children from harm, worrying about finances, managing teenagers who are searching for independence – there are new stressors that previous generations didn't have to consider," Dr. Murthy says in the report's forward. "These include the complexity of managing social media, parents' concerns about the youth mental health crisis, and an epidemic of loneliness that disproportionately affects young people and parents, just to name a few."

While stress is escalated by many factors, including uncertainties associated with climate change, many parents are particularly worried about the effects of social media on their children's mental health. Manifestations of social media exposure include anxiety, depression, lower [self-esteem](#), [bullying](#), [peer pressure](#), and/or exposure to explicit content that exceeds a child's capacity to understand or monitor. Consequently, state legislatures and schools are increasingly restricting the use of cell phones, smart watches and other personal devices on campus as part of efforts to counteract potentially detrimental effects.

According to a 2022 [Pew Research survey on Parenting in America Today](#), most parents say parenthood is harder than they expected, and they believe their parental role is more difficult than it was for their parents. On a positive note, 80 percent of respondents said being a parent is rewarding and enjoyable either all of the time (36 percent) or most of the time (44 percent). By comparison, 41 percent find it tiring and 29 percent say it's stressful.

### Stress Response

Conscientious working parents are struggling to achieve work-life balance. Meanwhile, adult responses to stress, such as short-temperdness, anxiousness, lack of interest in social engagement, frequent

illnesses or substance use have downstream impacts on children's mental health, and they reverberate in workplaces and across communities at large.

Studies show that while some parents are working longer hours, they are also spending more of their limited free time with their children than they did in the past. According to the [American Time Use Survey](#), work hours increased 28 percent for mothers and 4 percent for fathers between 1985 and 2022. During the same period, time spent directly caring for children increased by 40 percent for mothers and 154 percent for fathers, not accounting for those who also care for elders.

When parents work outside of the home, they may worry about how they are going to pay for childcare or transport their children to school and other activities. If they work from home, they may have the advantage of being there for the kids after school or daycare, but find their concentration and workflow is disrupted. This juggling act became clearly apparent with the advent of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Recommendations

To help counteract these challenges, Dr. Murthy encourages Americans, including supervisors and co-workers, to consider the constraints encountered by working parents. "With this advisory, I am calling for a fundamental shift in how we value and prioritize the mental health and well-being of parents. I am also outlining policies, programs and individual actions we can all take to support parents and caregivers."

Providing adequate support for parents and caregivers requires a multi-dimensional approach. For example, employers are encouraged to:

- Foster a workplace culture that supports the needs of parents and caregivers.
- Facilitate access to mental health care, for example, wellness or employee assistance programs.
- Adopt family-friendly policies such as flex schedules and paid time off to care for a sick child.
- As feasible, offer childcare options onsite or through community partnerships.

## Did You Know?

**In 2023, 32.6 million American families included children under age 18. At least one parent was employed in 92 percent of families with children. Among married-couple families with children, 97.6 percent had at least one employed parent; both married parents were employed in 67 percent of these families, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.**

- Teach employees about effective stress management techniques and encourage practice.

Workplace training might include instructions on how to recognize and manage signs of stress. A family-friendly culture may be enriched by actively involving parents in leadership roles and giving them opportunities to achieve their career goals.

Recommendations for family members and friends of parents with children under 18 include:

- Offering to take care of the kids, cooking a meal, running errands or doing household chores.
- Staying in close contact and listening to parents' concerns with empathy and without judgment.
- Becoming better educated about the mental health challenges parents and caregivers may face.
- Being aware that sleep-deprived parents with newborns are vulnerable to stresses and strains.

If you are a parent or caregiver, it's important to practice self-care so you can reduce stress, combat fatigue, feel fully functional and enjoy your life. If you have a parental partner, it helps to give each other an opportunity for alone time or a chance to independently socialize with friends. Whatever the circumstances, it's always advisable to manage stress by taking deep breaths or a mindful pause, getting enough sleep, having an exercise routine, eating nutritious foods and spending time outdoors.