

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers.



Coping with stress and developing resilience

The extra demands of caring for a child with a disability or special educational need can mean that parent carers are much more likely to suffer from stress, anxiety or even depression. We don't pretend to have a magic wand that can make your life stress-free but there are things you can do to help you to cope, which may increase your chances of managing stressful times more successfully in future – this is often called developing resilience.

Recognise the signs and symptoms of stress

One of the most important steps to building your resilience is noticing when you are stressed. These can be some of the common signs:

- Feeling irritable and emotional
- Eating more or less
- Avoiding social situations and being more withdrawn at home
- Feeling unable to enjoy activities such as family time, even when you've had a break
- An inability to concentrate and lacking motivation
- Aches, pains, headaches, dizziness, digestive problems, frequent colds
- Feeling worn out and not feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep

Don't ignore these signs – they can be a red flag that your own needs must be prioritised.

Talk to someone

If you notice you are showing signs of stress, tell someone you trust. This could be your partner or a friend or family member. Or if you find it hard to speak to your nearest and dearest, you could talk to a professional such as a counsellor, your GP or social worker. Just speaking about your state of mind can help to relieve stress and may lead to practical solutions that prevent problems getting more serious.

At first, you may find it useful to keep a sleep diary to track your child's sleep patterns. Over the course of a few weeks, write down as much as you can about bedtimes, periods of sleep and wakefulness, as well as daytime factors such as computer use, food and drinks your child has consumed, what exercise they have done and what their bedtime routine has been. Often this can help you to work out what may be causing the sleep problems. Even if you can't, it is a useful record to show any health professionals you work with.

Ask for help

It can be very hard to admit you need help and, even when someone offers their support, you can find yourself saying, "It's OK, I can manage," or worse still, accepting 'help' that in reality makes your life more difficult. Remember, there's nothing to be ashamed of in asking for help and many people feel touched if you choose to ask them to support you.





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It can help to spend some time thinking about the things that would really make a difference to you – perhaps someone to do the recycling, someone to babysit your other kids while you go to the doctors – and identify people who you think could do them. This also means you have some specific examples to hand whenever someone offers to help out of the blue.

Remember the basics

We all know we function better when we eat a balanced diet and get enough sleep and a bit of exercise though it's not always easy to do. If possible, try not to neglect these simple things and remember to appreciate all the things you do to make sure your kids have got their basic needs met too.

For many couples, parenthood brings them closer together, but looking after a relationship takes time and attention, something parent carers struggle to find. Stress can also get in the way of open communication and mutual encouragement. Take time to do shared activities with your partner outside the family if you can and keep talking.

If you are single parent, try and make time to maintain your friendships if you can. Not only can you draw on their support when you need help but sharing fun times can be crucial for general wellbeing. You could also see if there's a single parent group or network in your area.

Join a support group

Getting to know other parent carers can be a life-saver. Just being able to talk to someone who's going through the same sort of thing as you or who has been there before you and lived to tell the tale can make a world of difference and you may make lasting friendships. There are lots of local parent support groups, some for families with children with specific disabilities and some for any condition. Look at the 'Ask about' section below for details. If your child has a rare condition, **Contact** (0808 808 3555 or <https://contact.org.uk>) may be able to put you in touch with a group. They also have an online forum called **Making contact** (www.makingcontact.org) where parents can chat to each other.

Ask about

- **Carer's Support** – organisation that has support groups in Chichester and Crawley. Also runs information sessions and counselling as well as relaxation therapy. Go to: www.carerssupport.org.uk or tel: **0300 028 8888**.
- **Carer's Wellbeing Fund** – a grant of up to £300 available to support a carer's health and wellbeing. It is available through Carer's Support, see above, or through the **West Sussex Parent Carer Forum**, email: office@wspcf.org.uk or call: **01903 726188**.
- **Parent support groups** – refer to our handbooks *Making Sense of It All* and *Making Sense of Adult Life*, which both contain directories of local support groups as well as national organisations that can provide information and support. For further information, visit our website: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/guides.html.
- **Reading Well Books on Prescription** – borrow books that can help you cope with stress, anxiety and depression. Also has a list of mood-boosting books recommended by readers. See: <https://reading-well.org.uk>.
- **Social care** – can assess the needs of the whole family and do a Carer's Needs Assessment for you, call the the Integrated Front Door (IFD) for West Sussex Children Services, tel: **01403 229888**, email: WSChildrenservices@westsussex.gov.uk. For respite care for over 18s call the Adults' CarePoint: **01243 642121**, or email: socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk.





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Further information and useful links

- **Making Sense of it All and Making Sense of Adult Life (14+)** – Reaching Families' handbooks for parent carers of children and young people with SEND in West Sussex provide essential information on leisure and social lives, money matters, social care, health, employment and much more. Go to: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/guides.html.
- **Fact sheets** – see our companion fact sheets: *Short Breaks and Respite Care*; *Direct Payments*; and *Leisure* for information on support available. For more go to: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.html.
- **Carer's allowance** – you may qualify for carer's Allowance, a state benefit to help you look after someone with a disability. See: www.gov.uk/carers-allowance/overview.
- **Contact** – the Family Life section of their website has lots of information and advice about managing the demands of being a parent carer. Visit: <https://contact.org.uk/advice-and-support/your-child-your-family/family-life>.
- **Disability living allowance (DLA)** – your child may qualify for DLA, a state benefit that will help with their care. For further information visit: www.gov.uk/disability-living-allowance-children.
- **Direct payments** – if your child gets help from social services, you may qualify for direct payments, which can be used to employ a carer for a certain number of hours a week.
- **Family Fund** – you may be able to get help to pay for activities and short breaks. Go to: www.familyfund.org.uk and fill in their online enquiry form.
- **Five Ways to Wellbeing** – developed by the New Economics Foundation, these five steps have been proven to enhance wellbeing. See: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing.
- **MIND** – has lots of useful resources about mental health. Visit: www.mind.org.uk.
- **Online forums** – if you're not ready or able to meet other parents face to face there are a number of online forums that allow you to chat online with other mums and dads of children with SEND. Contact's 'Making contact' forum lets you share your experiences with others and get support (www.makingcontact.org); Scope has an online community for all people connected by a disability (<https://forum.scope.org.uk>); parenting sites Mumsnet (www.mumsnet.com) and Netmums (www.netmums.com) also have SEND areas within their forums.
- **Relate** – low cost relationship counselling for couples. See: www.relate.org.uk.
- **West Sussex Local Offer** – go to <https://westsussex.local-offer.org>.

