

# National Family Caregivers Month 2021



# Introduction

Mental Health America (MHA) is proud to recognize November as National Family Caregivers Month – a time to celebrate the contributions of caregivers and provide them with tools that they need for their mental health.

In 2021 MHA is focusing on parents – while not all caregivers are parents, all parents are caregivers. Parenting is greatly rewarding, but it can also be really hard. As a parent myself, I remember times when concerns for my school-age children were all-consuming – from worrisome sports injuries to trying to get the right supports in school for my child who struggled, and all the daily challenges (and joys!) in between. In retrospect, I know that I have always been better able to effectively support my children when I was also supporting my own mental health, but it is not always easy to prioritize self-care when one is caring for others in need.

Making sure the needs of your child/children are being met is of vital importance but may make maintaining physical and mental health more difficult and can put a strain on work, social, and romantic relationships. When you are caring for a child with a physical or mental health condition, the burden is even greater.

Data from MHAScreening.org show that 46% of parents caring for a child said that they were taking a screen because of the stress of caregiving, and fathers who were experiencing moderate-to-severe symptoms of a mental health condition were *much* less likely to have received previous mental health support than mothers. Furthermore, sandwich generation caregivers (those caring for their children and their parents) were more likely to screen at risk of a mental health condition than the general caregiving population.

To address these needs, MHA has gathered a wealth of resources to help parents and other caregivers work through the challenges of caregiving, start conversations, deal with crisis, and address their own mental health. We've also created new resources for single parents, the sandwich generation, and new fathers – who may feel left out of parental health conversations.

It is our hope that you'll share this information far and wide to help support those who dedicate so much of their lives to supporting and caring for others.

Sincerely,



*Schroeder Stribling*

Schroeder Stribling  
President & CEO  
Mental Health America

## THIS TOOLKIT INCLUDES:

Social Media Images  
MHA Resource List  
Fact Sheets

- Mental Health and the New Father
- Caregiving and the Sandwich Generation
- Mental Health and the Single Parent

## QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about National Family Caregivers Month, please contact Danielle Fritze, Vice President of Public Education and Design at [dfritze@mhanational.org](mailto:dfritze@mhanational.org).

# Social Media Images

Download and save the images provided for use on your social media platforms or websites. The images below can be downloaded at <https://bit.ly/2021nfcmm>.

**One in 10 fathers experience Paternal Postpartum Depression (PPPD) and up to 16% deal with an anxiety disorder during the weeks before and after birth.**

**Single mothers are more likely to experience poor mental health (28.7%) than mothers with partners (15.7%), largely in part to financial struggles and lack of support.**

**Single mothers and fathers have higher rates of mental health and substance use conditions than partnered parents.**

33.6% of single fathers had one or more of the following disorders:

- depression;
- panic disorder;
- specific phobia;
- obsessive-compulsive disorder; and
- generalized anxiety disorder;

compared with 13.3% of partnered fathers, 28.4% of lone mothers, and 16.0% of partnered mothers.

**The Sandwich Generation**

"The sandwich generation" refers to adults who care for both their aging parents and their own children.

It is not a specific generation or cohort in the sense of the Greatest Generation or the baby boomer generation, but a phenomenon that can affect anyone whose parents and children need support at the same time.

These "sandwiched" people become responsible for caring for their parents and their children at the same time. They may help their loved ones with daily functioning, medical services and supervision, giving medications, and aiding in financial, legal, and emotional difficulties of their loved ones as well as themselves.

**Roughly a third of sandwich generation caregivers report a high level of emotional stress and a fifth report high levels of financial and physical strain.**

**Sandwich generation caregivers are more ethnically diverse, younger, and newer to caregiving than other caregivers.**

**Family Caregivers and Mental Health**

**60 Million**

Americans are unpaid caregivers to family, friends, and neighbors. This number is expected to increase with the aging baby boomer generation.

That means: **1 out of 5** people are caregivers.

- 1 in 3 unpaid caregivers in the US are millennials.
- 1.5 million caregivers are children aged 8-18.
- 2.7 million co-resident grandparents are primary caregivers for their grandchildren.

**5 Common Issues Among Caregivers**

- 23% of caregivers report a decrease in health while caregiving.
- 87% of caregivers do not get asked by a doctor about their needs.
- 53% of caregivers require work accommodations.
- 36% of caregivers report high emotional stress.
- 85% of caregivers do not get a break.

**5 Tips for Being an Effective Caregiver**

1. Get educated
2. Encourage treatment
3. Give them freedom
4. Be a friend
5. Take care of yourself

**Caregivers of people with a mental illness are:**

- 15% more likely to feel emotional stress
- 11% more likely to say they didn't receive training
- 11% more likely to report fair or poor health
- 9% more likely to feel financial strain

**1 out of 5** of caregivers help someone with a mental illness.

**1 of 4** caregivers report they have depression.

**Taking Care of You**

**3** most helpful things according to caregivers

- 73% prayer
- 61% talking
- 44% reading

**5** additional tips for taking care of yourself

- Take time out for you
- Get enough sleep
- Exercise
- Balance your life
- Get help if you need it



# Resources from MHA

All of the resources below can also be accessed from our new Caregiver Hub at [mhanational.org/caregiver](https://mhanational.org/caregiver)

## CAREGIVER BASICS

- [7 Tips For Talking To A Loved One About Their Mental Health](#)
- [Being An Effective Caregiver](#)
- [Can I Use My PTO To Take Care Of A Sick Family Member?](#)
- [Caregiver Identity & Mental Health \[FACEBOOK LIVE RECORDING\]](#)
- [Caregiving For A Person With A Mental Illness](#)
- [Caregiving In BIPOC Communities](#)
- [Challenges And Solutions For Mental Health Caregivers For Family And Friends](#)
- [Friends & Family Information & Support](#)
- [How Can I Help A Loved One With A Mental Illness?](#)
- [How Can I Help A Loved One With Anxiety?](#)
- [How Can I Help A Loved One With Bipolar?](#)
- [How Can I Help A Loved One With PTSD?](#)
- [How To Help Someone Get Motivated](#)
- [I Think My Family Member Is Having A Psychotic Break](#)
- [I Think Someone I Care About Has A Mental Illness](#)
- [Mental Illness And The Family: Recognizing Warning Signs And How To Cope](#)
- [My Loved One Won't Talk To Me About Their Mental Health](#)
- [November Is National Family Caregivers Month](#)
- [Someone I Care About Is Harming Themselves](#)
- [Supporting Others: How Do I Help Someone? \[PODCAST\]](#)
- [Taking Care Of The Caregiver \[WEBINARS\]](#)
- [What To Do When They Don't Want Help](#)
- [Will Talking About Someone's Delusions Make Them Sicker?](#)

## CAREGIVER STRESS

- [Being In A Relationship With Someone Who Has A Mental Illness \[PODCAST\]](#)
- [How Can I Find Support As A Caregiver?](#)
- [How Can I Take Care Of Someone If I Also Have A Mental Illness?](#)
- [I Need A Break From Caregiving!](#)
- [I'm Frustrated With My Significant Other's Mental Illness](#)
- [On Pins And Needles: Caregivers Of Adults With Mental Illness \[REPORT\]](#)
- [Taking Care Of Someone Is Too Stressful!](#)
- [The Strain Of Caregiving: How Caregiver Involvement Reduces Distress And Conflict \[REPORT\]](#)

## CRISIS

- [Alternatives To Calling The Police In A Crisis](#)
- [Crisis Planning Worksheet For Caregivers And Their Loved Ones](#)
- [Mental Illness And The Family: Is Hospitalization Necessary?](#)
- [My Family Member Refuses To Go To The Hospital](#)
- [My Loved One's Behavior Is Scaring Me](#)

## PARENTING

- [Back To Normal – Or Not: How To Help Your Family Through COVID-19 Transitions](#)
- [Bipolar Disorder In Children](#)
- [Bullying Tips For Parents](#)
- [Catalyzing Mental Health Support For Moms Through Specialized Peer Support Training \[WEBINAR\]](#)
- [Depression In Fathers \[PODCAST\]](#)
- [Depression In Teens](#)
- [Healthy Mental And Emotional Development](#)
- [Helping At Home: Tips For Parents](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Loss](#)
- [Helping Children Cope With Tragedy Related Anxiety](#)
- [Helping Children Deal With Deployment](#)
- [How To Cope With The Stress Of Homeschooling \(For Parents\)](#)
- [How To Talk To Your Anxious Child Or Teen About Coronavirus](#)
- [How To Teach Your Child Body Positivity](#)
- [I'm Worried I'll Hurt My Baby \[PODCAST\]](#)
- [Infographic: Things Adults Say That Hurt Instead Of Help](#)
- [Maternal Depression-Making A Difference Through Community Action: A Planning Guide](#)
- [Maternal Mental Health](#)
- [Maternal Mental Health During The Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Military Mental Health: Reconnecting With Your Children](#)
- [Navigating Behavioral Challenges With Remote Schooling For Parents \[WEBINAR\]](#)
- [Parenting During Coronavirus](#)
- [Parenting While Caring For An Aging Parent](#)
- [Parenting With A Mental Health Condition](#)
- [Position Statement 49: Perinatal Mental Health](#)
- [Pregnancy And Postpartum Disorders](#)
- [Prevention And Early Intervention In Mental Health - Consequences Of Failing Our Children](#)
- [Prevention And Early Intervention In Mental Health - Early Childhood To Puberty](#)
- [Prevention And Early Intervention In Mental Health - Prenatal Period To Early Childhood](#)
- [Prevention And Early Intervention In Mental Health - Puberty To Early Adulthood](#)
- [Psychosis \(Schizophrenia\) In Children And Youth](#)
- [Recognizing Mental Health Problems In Children](#)
- [Talking To Adolescents And Teens: Starting The Conversation](#)
- [Talking To Adolescents And Teens: Time To Talk](#)
- [Talking To Adolescents And Teens: What To Do And Where To Go](#)
- [Talking To Kids About Fear And Violence](#)
- [Talking To Kids About School Safety](#)
- [Teachers & Families: Coping With Back-To-School Stress \[WEBINAR\]](#)
- [Teachers And Parents: Working Together To Make Distance Learning Work](#)
- [Ten To Twenty Percent Of New Moms Experience Postpartum Depression: Why Should Employers Care?](#)
- [What Every Child Needs For Good Mental Health](#)
- [Youth Mental Health](#)

## TOOLS & RESOURCES

- [Depression Test For New And Expecting Parents](#)
- [Family Care Navigator](#)
- [Parent Screen \(About Child's Mental Health\)](#)
- [MHA Affiliate Locator](#)
- [Resources For Immediate Response](#)
- [S-Anon International Family Groups](#)
- [Survivors Of Suicide Support Groups](#)

## TREATMENT & RECOVERY

- [Community Inclusion From The Perspective Of Caregivers \[REPORT\]](#)
- [Fostering Self-Determination As A Caregiver](#)
- [HIPAA: What Are A Caregiver's Rights?](#)
- [How Can I Access A Loved One's Health Care Info?](#)
- [How Can I Work With My Loved One's Mental Health Care Providers?](#)
- [How To Help Someone Make Decisions About Their Mental Health](#)
- [My Loved One Doesn't Want To Take Meds](#)
- [New Treatment Options](#)
- [Setting Goals For Recovery](#)
- [Talking To Treatment Providers](#)
- [The Caregiver And Community Inclusion](#)
- [Treatment Supports](#)

## OTHER

- [How Do I Know If I'm Enabling Someone?](#)
- [Just Checking In On Friends](#)
- [My Loved One Has Started Moving Strangely](#)
- [Someone I Care About Killed Themselves](#)
- [Someone I Love Is In Jail](#)
- [Family Caregiver Mental Health And COVID-19](#)
- [Peer, Friend And Self Support In The COVID-19 Crisis: How To Provide Support For Ourselves And Others Through Times Of Fear And Isolation \[WEBINAR\]](#)

## EN ESPAÑOL

- [Apoyando A Los Demás](#)
- [Ayudando Niños Crecer Sanos - Mente Y Cuerpo](#)
- [Cómo Afrontar El Cuidado De Un Padre Que Se Esta Haciendo Mayor](#)
- [Cómo Ayudar A Nuestros Niños A Afrontar La Guerra](#)
- [Cómo Lidiar Con El Estrés De La Educación En Casa \(Para Padres\)](#)
- [Desconsuelo Y Aflicción - Información Para Los Familiares De Militares](#)
- [Directorio De Profesionales De La Salud Mental Para Personas Latinas](#)
- [Identificar Las Señales: Reconociendo Los Problemas De Salud Mental En Niños Y Adolescentes](#)
- [Maestros Y Padres: Trabajando Juntos Para Que El Aprendizaje A Distancia Funcione](#)

## NEW!

- [Caregiving And The Sandwich Generation](#)
- [Mental Health And The New Father](#)
- [Mental Health And The Single Parent](#)



# Mental Health and the New Father

Becoming a parent is a huge milestone for anyone, but when a new baby joins the family, it's common for support systems to prioritize the mother and child. Even many health professionals educate moms on what to expect during the transition to motherhood, while the transition to fatherhood is primarily addressed in the context of supporting the mother and baby – if it is at all.

Between the lack of education about the challenges of fatherhood and societal pressures of masculinity, dads don't always pay attention to their mental health after bringing a child into the family. While they may notice changes in their mood and behavior, they might not recognize them as symptoms of a mental health condition. Many don't even know that men can experience pre- and postpartum depression and anxiety – around one in 10 fathers experience Paternal Postpartum Depression (PPPD) and up to 16% deal with an anxiety disorder during the weeks before and after birth.<sup>1</sup>

## FAST FACTS

- ▶ Approximately **75 million** men in the United States are **fathers** – that's about **60% of all men over age 15**.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ There are around **2 million single fathers** in the U.S. – about 40% are divorced, 38% never married, 15% separated, and 6% widowed.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ The **average age** at which men become **fathers has increased** over time – from 27.4 years old in 1972, to 30.9 years old in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

## COMMON STRESSORS

### Drastic Life Changes

Often the feelings of love and joy that a new baby brings are mixed with feelings of frustration and regret over losing your old life. There's an adjustment period for everyone when a new member joins the family. Overnight, you become much less in control of how you spend your time than you were before. This lifestyle change can be especially jarring if you're a first-time parent. Most fathers find their expectations of parenthood to be very different than reality.

Talk to other dads or new parents – they are likely navigating similar changes and stresses. If you don't personally know any other new fathers or fathers of young children:

- Search for support groups. There may be local groups that meet in person, or you can look online. Facebook is a good place to start.
- Introduce yourself to other dads. Try striking up a conversation while picking your child up from daycare or at child-centered community events. If your child's mother has mommy friends, see if she can introduce you to their partners.

### Guilt Around Bonding

Bonding with a newborn is often more difficult for fathers than mothers, especially if the mother carried the child – men miss out on a lot of direct connection with the baby during pregnancy and soon after birth, from carrying and birthing the baby to breastfeeding. It's also uncommon for men to take significant time off work after the birth of their child. Paid paternity leave is not standard for most companies, and while 90% of new fathers take some time off, 70% take ten days or less<sup>5</sup>, which is fewer than the weeks of maternity leave a woman typically takes. If you are having a hard time feeling close to your baby and feelings of guilt arise, it may be tempting to withdraw even further. Try not to be too hard on yourself if you don't feel a quick connection with your baby. While men generally spend more time with their young children now than in past generations, it's entirely normal for it to take weeks or months to develop an intimate emotional bond with your baby.

Mothers have a head start when bonding with a baby, but there are plenty of ways to grow a strong father-child connection.

- Skin-to-skin contact is important for babies and a great way to initiate a bond – let the baby snuggle against your bare chest and feel your heartbeat.
- If you spoke to the baby in the womb, they will likely already recognize your voice; continuing to talk to them (or read, or sing) helps that bond grow.
- Make alone time for you and the baby (it will give your partner a break, too!) – be in charge of bath time, take over some of the feeds if mom isn't exclusively breastfeeding, or wear the baby in a carrier while doing light tasks around the house.

### Relationship Changes

There are non-stop household chores and baby duties to take care of with a new baby and sleep deprivation on top of everything else. You're probably bickering more than before, and what used to be couple time is now family time. You and your partner likely both feel like you're doing your best to take

care of the many things that need to get done. Still, sometimes it can feel like your partner isn't doing enough, which can quickly lead to resentment – especially when you aren't getting the quality time that relationships need.

Make an effort to talk with your partner about things other than the baby and parenthood, even if it's just a few minutes each day. It doesn't have to be a whole date night (but if you have a sitter, go for it!) – you can chat while pushing the baby around the block in the stroller or spend a few minutes before you go to bed each night catching up. Planning regular “meetings” to bring up household- and baby-related issues can help you and your partner keep parent-talk to a minimum during your quality time.

## Loneliness & Isolation

Many parents struggle with feeling isolated in the chaos of bringing a newborn home – your life becomes consumed with caring for the baby. You may feel disconnected from your friends, your partner, and even yourself. Few people talk about the transition from a father's point of view, but your feelings about new parenthood are valid too.

Remember that while your primary identity may be ‘Dad’ right now, you were you first, and it's important not to lose that. Take time for yourself to do things you enjoy and connect with others who make you feel understood. This may mean finding a babysitter for a few hours or taking turns watching the baby so you and your partner can each get some “me time.” It can be hard to prioritize yourself when there is a seemingly never-ending list of things to be done but taking care of yourself means you can give your child an even better version of you.

## Protector & Provider Expectations

Fathers often face significant stress related to their work and income when a new child joins the family. There can be a lot of pressure for fathers to be the protector, provider, and disciplinarian of the family, both from external parties and yourself. Because the child's mother has gone through the physically demanding part of bringing a child into the world, fathers often feel increased pressure to compensate in some way once the baby arrives. Children are expensive – your spending likely increased significantly when the baby arrived and it's easy to feel like you're drowning in payments, especially if money was already tight. Remember that these days, the burden of financially providing for a family no longer needs to fall entirely on you – the lines between your duties and your partner's duties are less rigid than they used to be.

Take time regularly to reflect on your priorities – let the little things go and give yourself credit for the successes you have had as a new parent. Things can easily spiral out of control when you don't have systems in place, and while it can be hard to get yourself to slow down, putting in some extra time and effort now will likely save you time down the road – work out a realistic budget to see where you can shift money to account for new expenses, reexamine your savings priorities, and have regular check-ins with your partner and anyone else in your financial support system.

## Parenting Anxiety

Nearly all parents deal with the fear that they will mess up – you're likely to experience doubts and feelings of inadequacy at some point during your fatherhood journey. No one can be entirely prepared for parenthood before it happens to them.

When feelings of doubt set in, it can be hard to gather the mental energy to be the type of father you want to be. Feeling more informed and confident about what to expect can go a long way – familiarize yourself with [basic developmental milestones](#) and be as engaged with the baby as possible. Successful parenting is less about being prepared for every problem and more about adapting and recovering from challenges. Accept that things won't always go as planned and that you can't fix everything. Focus on stress management – move your body, make sure to eat enough, and remind yourself that you're doing the best you can.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Life transitions are really difficult for our brains to process and feeling overwhelmed with all the change you're experiencing in early fatherhood is completely normal, and you should not be ashamed. Check out Kevin Seldon's podcast, [Dad I'd Like To Friend](#), for relatable and honest content on parenthood.

However, if these feelings have you feeling unable to function, it might be time to seek professional mental health help. Take an online screen at [mhascreening.org](#) to determine if you're dealing with symptoms of a mental health condition – you can show your results to a doctor to begin the conversation.

---

## Sources

<sup>1</sup>National Institute for Children's Health Quality. (2021). *Promoting fathers' mental health during children's early childhood*. <https://www.nichq.org/insight/promoting-fathers-mental-health-during-childrens-early-childhood>

<sup>2</sup>Monte, L.M. & Knop, B. (2019). *Men's fertility and fatherhood: Current population reports*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/demo/P70-162.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>United States Census Bureau. (2021, October 8). *Fathers in the United States*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sis/resources/news/fathers.html>

<sup>4</sup>Khandwala, Y.S., Zhang, C.A., Lu, Y., & Eisenberg, M.L. (2017). The age of fathers in the USA is rising: an analysis of 168,867,480 births from 1972 to 2015. *Human Reproduction*, 32(10), 2110-2116. DOI: 10.1093/humrep/dex267

<sup>5</sup>Grose, J. (2020, February 19). *Why dads don't take parental leave*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/19/parenting/why-dads-dont-take-parental-leave.html>



# Caregiving and the Sandwich Generation

The term *sandwich generation* refers to young to middle-aged adults who are simultaneously raising children and supporting their aging parents. More than one in 10 parents in the United States also care for an adult, spending about three hours each day on caregiving duties between their children and parents.<sup>1</sup> Being a sandwich generation caregiver can be exhausting, expensive, and emotional; juggling it all isn't easy, but there are ways to make it easier.

## FAST FACTS

- ▶ An estimated **11 million** caregivers (28% of all caregivers) provide **unpaid care to an adult while also caring for children** in the home.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ The typical **sandwich generation** caregiver was **born between 1965 and 1980** and is **more ethnically diverse, younger, and newer to caregiving** than other caregivers.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Roughly **a third** of sandwich generation caregivers report a **high level of emotional stress** and a **fifth** report **high levels of financial and physical strain**.<sup>4</sup>

## COMMON STRESSORS

### Little to No Personal Time

Parenting and caring for an aging parent both take a lot of time and energy on their own – when you're in the middle and trying to do both, it can feel impossible to make time for anything other than caring for others. Sandwich generation adults are more likely than other adults to say they are pressed for time,<sup>5</sup> but it is possible – and crucial – to reserve time for yourself.

- Prioritize getting (and staying) organized – the seemingly constant demands can feel overwhelming, so plan regular family meetings to talk about upcoming commitments, delegate tasks, and get everyone on the same page.
- Don't be afraid or intimidated to ask for help – you'll likely be surprised by how many people are happy to support you and aren't sure what you need. Call on friends and neighbors when you need a break.
- If you have siblings, get them to help with costs, hands-on care, and spending time with your aging parent so that your role as a caregiver doesn't take over your entire life.

### Family Discord

Providing care for an aging parent is often stressful – while it can be a time for siblings and other relatives to come together and provide mutual support, the transition often brings out intense emotions. You'll probably find yourself having disagreements with other family members about parental care decisions, financial responsibilities, and even bringing up old childhood disputes.

- Be honest and direct about your feelings – approach caregiving conversations with as much patience and grace as possible and let your other family members know that their help is both wanted and needed.
- Be realistic about what help others can provide and be clear on your expectations from them (and ensure you understand *their* expectations).
- Try to see things from each other's points of view, respect differing opinions, and compromise where you can. If the situation is particularly tense, arrange for a conversation with a mediator (like a therapist, social worker, or other trusted third party) who can make sure that everyone is heard and respected.

### Dealing With Complex Emotions

While you may be your parent's caregiver now, you're still their child. Experiencing the role reversal so directly can bring about a lot of [big feelings](#). You might be experiencing anticipatory grief – anxiety, dread, or sadness as you await their passing. You may also feel a sense of loss of your independence as you're increasingly needed as a caregiver, which can bring up feelings of guilt. Anger and resentment are common, too. All of these feelings are normal when facing such challenging circumstances.

- Sharing what you're going through is often one of the best ways of healing. You can do this in whatever way feels right to you – with a support group, a therapist, a trusted friend, or in a journal that no one will ever read – but putting your thoughts and feelings into words is a great way to start processing them.

- Make sure you're attending to your own needs; while your child and parent may need you, you're in a highly emotional situation and deserve to let yourself grieve.

## Feeling Like A Failure

It can be impossible to live up to your own standards when you have so much on your plate. As a sandwich generation caregiver, you might feel like you can't be the parent you want to be to your children or the caretaker you want to be to your parent – there's only so much you can do in a day, and perfection just isn't achievable.

- Try not to be too hard on yourself – you are in a very uniquely challenging situation and doing the best you can looks different each day.
- Pay attention to avoid black-and-white thinking; just because you didn't do something exactly the way you intended doesn't mean it wasn't worth doing or that you failed.
- Acknowledge all that you *have* done and know that if you've fallen short on some things here and there, following through on the big things is what matters.

## Navigating Cultural Expectations

Different cultures and families have varying norms and expectations when it comes to older adult care. BIPOC individuals are more likely to consider caregiving to be a cultural expectation, and for many, there's no real decision to be made about whether to take on caregiving responsibilities – it's simply a given. If you're a caregiver in this situation, you may feel more alone than others, especially if your workplace, friends, or other support systems don't understand your obligations. It's also common to feel some resentment or bitterness about feeling pushed into this role.

Lean on your family or other members of your cultural community during times like this – it's likely they've been in a similar situation and experienced that same feelings that you're dealing with now. Make time to connect with your parent as their child – go for a walk, run non-care-related errands, or do something else that doesn't have your caregiver identity front and center.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Caring for an aging parent and parenting your own child at the same time is heavy – a lot of emotion, energy, and coordination go into each independently, and it can be especially difficult to try to manage both at the same time. If you're doing your best to manage as a sandwich generation caregiver and you consistently feel like you can't stay afloat, take a mental health screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to determine if you're dealing with symptoms of a mental health condition.

---

### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Livingston, G. (2018, November 29). *More than one-in-ten U.S. parents are also caring for an adult*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/29/more-than-one-in-ten-u-s-parents-are-also-caring-for-an-adult/>

<sup>2</sup>National Alliance for Caregiving & Caring Across Generations. (2019). *Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Sandwich Generation Caregiving in the U.S.* [https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG\\_SandwichCaregiving\\_Report\\_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf](https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG_SandwichCaregiving_Report_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>National Alliance for Caregiving & Caring Across Generations. (2019). *Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Sandwich Generation Caregiving in the U.S.* [https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG\\_SandwichCaregiving\\_Report\\_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf](https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NAC-CAG_SandwichCaregiving_Report_Digital-Nov-26-2019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>Parker, K. & Patten, E. (2013, January 30). *The sandwich generation: Rising financial burdens for middle-aged Americans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/01/30/the-sandwich-generation/>



# Mental Health and the Single Parent

Single-parent families are increasingly common in the United States – some start that way, while others come about after divorce, death, or incarceration. Sometimes one parent’s job requires them to travel often or for extended periods, making their partner effectively a single parent at times. There are many types of single-parent families, headed by a biological parent, grandparent, foster or adoptive parent, sibling, or temporary guardian.

## FAST FACTS

- ▶ **Twenty-three percent of U.S. children** under age 18 live with **one parent** and no other adults, compared to **7% of children worldwide**.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ **One-quarter of parents** living in the U.S. today are **unmarried**.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ In 2020, about **15.21 million children** lived with a **single mother** in the U.S., compared to about **3.27 million children** living with a **single father**.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMON STRESSORS

### Feeling Stretched Too Thin

If you’re a single parent, you’ve likely experienced being at your limit regarding commitments and responsibilities. Daily demands like running errands, cleaning, and cooking still need to be taken care of, although there is only one person to do them. Balancing these and other responsibilities like school pick up and drop off, after-school activities, and work can spiral out of control. Sometimes the stress builds up gradually, and you don’t notice until it’s too late, or it might happen suddenly because of external events, leaving you no time to prepare or even wrap your mind around the situation.

Try to identify your early warning signs of feeling overwhelmed – feeling resentful, irritable, or quick to lose your cool is usually a good indicator. Even if it feels impossible, allowing yourself time alone to relax will make you better able to manage your stress and energy levels. Don’t be afraid to reach out for help! Lean on the adults in your and your child(ren)’s lives. You can’t be everywhere, everyone, and everything – even if you want to be. Aim to take an hour a week to treat yourself at your favorite coffee shop, read a book without interruptions, take a long shower, or even catch a nap.

### Financially Supporting the Family

If you’re a single parent, you’re likely operating with a smaller household income and budget than two-parent families, and the responsibility for financial decisions is all on you, which can be a severe mental burden. Child care is expensive, and with single parents often being both the primary earners and caregivers in a household, it is a necessity. Staying on top of your funds may seem impossible, but taking steps to understand and organize your finances can reduce the stress you’re experiencing.

Prioritize financial literacy – it’s difficult to make any real progress with debt, budgeting, or saving until you understand the basics. You can find educational resources on financial strategies, tips, and best practices from sites like [Khan Academy](#), [GCF Learn Free](#), and [MyMoney.gov](#), including interactive tools like quizzes and worksheets. Seek out assistance programs through places of worship, community centers, schools, or the government – single parents, more so than partnered parents, have to rely on community support. You can also get your kids involved – have them clip coupons, hunt for your weekly staples in ads, and challenge them to think of ways to reuse old materials. There’s no shame in asking for help; doing everything alone isn’t worth the level of stress it can create, and the less stress you’re under, the better parent you can be for your kids.

### Disagreements & Custody Disputes

While co-parenting comes with some benefits like getting time to yourself and shared financial responsibilities, it can also be really difficult – and having the other parent in the picture can sometimes bring an additional layer of stress to single parenting. You and the other parent may face continued conflict, arguments about decisions, and custody disputes. Disagreements between co-parents on raising your child(ren) are unavoidable. Still, they can turn into angry confrontations, especially if dealing with a high conflict individual. For the sake of your kids’ well-being, you can develop a civil working relationship with their other parent, as long as it is physically and psychologically safe for you to do so.

The first step to having a healthy working relationship with your child’s other parent is to separate your personal relationship with them from the co-parenting relationship. Remember that your children are the priority, not your feelings about each other – try to start thinking about your relationship with your ex as an entirely new relationship that is solely about your kids. Agree on a parenting plan that lays out how you’ll handle scheduling, finances,

and other significant decisions; with explicitly clear boundaries, you're less likely to run into conflict. Take care of your own emotional needs during this time of tension – lean on your friends and family or reach out to a mental health professional. Maintain an open dialogue with your attorney when dealing with conflict from the co-parent; they can advise you on steps to protect yourself and your kids from harm.

### Little to No Personal Time

Being a single parent often means putting your children's wants and needs above your own. While good parenting does involve making sacrifices, it doesn't mean neglecting yourself or doing everything on your own. Finding time for yourself isn't a desire – it is an essential need. It can feel impossible to carve out this time among all of your other responsibilities, but you are the only one who can make sure your own needs are met.

Turn to your family and friends first, if you can – drop the kids off with someone you trust for a few hours on a weekend morning or swap child care nights with another single parent. Don't turn down help if it's offered, whether for a ride to soccer practice, to watch the kids, or to run errands and take a few things off your to-do list. If you don't have that kind of natural support system, see if a local church or community center has a parent's night out or connections to reduced-cost child care. Part of what takes up so much time as a single parent is managing all the household duties; delegate age-appropriate chores to your kids to lighten your load. As kids get older, child care is not as much of an issue, but expectations for your constant availability might be – set boundaries on times that you are off-limits except for emergencies.

### Loneliness & Isolation

Feelings of loneliness are common as a single parent. Often it is less about being physically alone and more about making decisions solo – having to make judgment calls alone can be mentally taxing. As the sole primary adult in a child's life, you might feel like you have no one to back you up, bounce ideas off of, or navigate challenges with. Depending on the other connections you have, you might also feel isolated from other adults and wish you had another person to share the experience of parenting with.

Just because you don't have a significant other doesn't mean that you don't have people to reach out to and ask for help, advice, or validation. Ignore the voice in your head that says people are too busy or don't want to hear from you – no one expects you to know all the answers, especially on your own. If you don't feel like you have anyone to turn to, start building up your network – join the PTA at your child's school, strike up a conversation with the parent you always see at the playground, or check out a single parent support group. Finding a sense of belonging as a single parent can be especially difficult; it's common to feel stuck in the middle of married parents and single adults without children. Connecting with others who "just get it" can help you feel less alone.

### Taking Care of Yourself

If you're taking steps to support your mental health but the pressures of parenthood are getting to you, you aren't alone. Single parenting is hard, but it shouldn't feel like a constant hit to your mental health. Take an online screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) to determine if you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition like depression or anxiety. If the stress you're facing is interfering with your daily life, it may be time to seek out a mental health professional.

---

#### Sources

<sup>1</sup>United States Census Bureau. (2021, March 21). *National Single Parent Day: March 21, 2021*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/single-parent-day.html>

<sup>2</sup>Livingston, G. (2018, April 25). *The changing profile of unmarried parents*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/04/25/the-changing-profile-of-unmarried-parents/>

<sup>3</sup>Statista Research Department. (2021, September 3). *Number of children living with a single mother or a single father in the U.S. from 1970 to 2020*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/252847/number-of-children-living-with-a-single-mother-or-single-father/>

