



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**.¹
- ▶ **One-quarter of parents** living in the U.S. today are **unmarried**.²
- ▶ 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**.³

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 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

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

²Livingston, 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/>

³Statista 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/>