



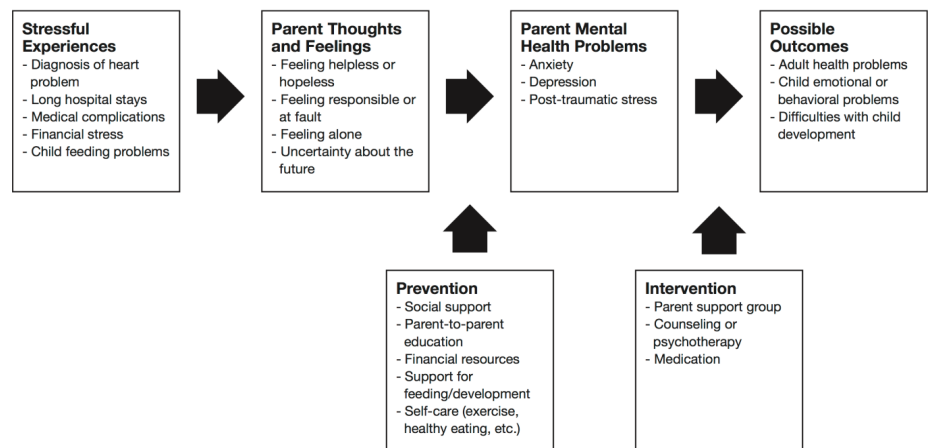
Promoting Mental Health for Parents of Children with Heart Conditions

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Pediatric heart problems can have a huge impact on parents and families. It is common for parents to feel scared and overwhelmed when learning about their child's heart problem or during hospitalizations. It is also common for parents to feel alone at times, as stress can affect how family members communicate with and support one another. For many parents, stress decreases as the child's health improves and the family settles into a routine at home. However, some parents and families continue to struggle emotionally long after the child's health has improved. Research studies indicate that parents of children with heart problems often experience difficulties with anxiety, depression, and traumatic stress related to upsetting aspects of the child's medical course.¹ Parents with financial challenges and less social support may be at greater risk for emotional difficulties. However, even parents with high levels of support can struggle emotionally.

Why is parent mental health important?

Parent mental health is important for a number of reasons. Research studies suggest that children with heart problems are at greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems when their parents report chronic stress and problems in family relationships.² A recent study also found that chronic stress contributes to health problems among adults.³ While it can be difficult for parents to focus on their own mental health when their child has a heart problem, parent mental health is an important part of child and family wellbeing.



What should I watch for? When should I become concerned?

All parents feel sad and anxious at times, but most are still able to complete the tasks required in daily life. However, it is cause for concern when emotional difficulties get in the way of parenting, working, or handling other aspects of daily living. See Table 1 for symptoms and behaviors that may indicate mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, or traumatic stress.

What can I do if I am having problems?

There are things that parents can do to handle stress. Basic self-care such as eating healthy and regular meals, getting sleep, exercising, and taking time for oneself can help. Talking to other parents who have faced similar challenges can also help. If parents are struggling emotionally while their child is hospitalized, a social worker may be able to connect them with hospital or community resources to reduce stress (for example, support groups, parent-to-parent education, temporary housing near the hospital). It is also important for parents to talk with their child's hospital care team about ways that the team can best support their family (for example, supporting parents in holding or comforting their child). A psychologist or counselor may be available within the hospital to work with parents on adjusting to medical challenges and coping with stress. However, if emotional difficulties continue and are severe, parents may need professional help outside of the hospital. There are medications and therapies that are effective in treating many mental health problems. Parents should work with their primary care provider to develop a treatment plan.

Why should I get help?

It is important for parents to seek help if needed, as mental health problems can become worse if not treated. Addressing parent mental health problems can help to ensure a positive family environment in which children with heart problems can develop and thrive.



Table 1. Symptoms that may indicate mental health problems.

Diagnosis	Symptoms	Examples
Anxiety	Uncontrollable anxiety or worry Avoiding situations that result in anxiety Restlessness Easily fatigued Problems concentrating Irritability Muscle tension Sleep problems	Constant worry that something is wrong with child's heart Putting off doctor's appointments due to fear of bad news Feeling "keyed up," on edge Feeling tired all of the time Can't focus, mind goes blank Easily annoyed Tense muscles or pain in neck, shoulders Problems falling or staying asleep, or restless sleep
Depression	Depressed mood Loss of interest in activities Change in weight or appetite Sleep problems Fatigue/loss of energy Feelings of worthlessness, guilt Concentration problems Recurrent thoughts of death	Feeling sad, empty, hopeless most of the time Not enjoying things that used to be fun, social withdrawal Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain Can't fall asleep, frequent night waking, sleep too much Difficulty getting out of bed or completing daily tasks Low self-esteem, feeling to blame for child's condition Can't focus, can't make decisions Thinking there is no point in living
Traumatic stress	Exposure to traumatic event Frequent, upsetting memories of traumatic event Frequent, upsetting dreams of traumatic event Feeling distressed when reminded of traumatic event Avoiding reminders of traumatic event Negative thinking or mood Changes in arousal/reactivity	Witnessing child get chest compressions after cardiac arrest Can't get thoughts of child in intensive care unit out of mind Nightmares about child's hospitalization Feeling panic during routine appointments at the hospital Taking a different route to avoid driving past the hospital Feeling detached from others, frequent negative emotions Irritable behavior, angry outbursts, sleep problems

References

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