

Resilience and Challenges of Working Mothers during COVID-19

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Abstract: The pandemic has brought on much hardships and highlighted the many inequities in our lives, including the increasing workload for working mothers. Compared to pre-pandemic, maternal research has found mothers to have increases in anxiety and depression during the pandemic. Given the added stressors of the pandemic, this paper aims to highlight some evidence-based strategies that mothers can use to support their mental health during the pandemic and beyond. These mental health strategies include (1) Self-compassion and mindfulness (2) Physical self-care (sleep and physical activity time); (3) Connecting time (maintaining social connections and shared responsibilities); and (4) Playtime (having fun!).

Abstraite: La pandémie a causé beaucoup de difficultés et a mis en évidence les nombreuses inégalités dans nos vies, y compris la charge de travail croissante des mères qui travaillent. Par rapport à la période pré-pandémique, la recherche sur les mères a révélé que les mères présentaient une augmentation de l'anxiété et de la dépression pendant la pandémie. Compte tenu des facteurs de stress supplémentaires de la pandémie, cet article vise à mettre en évidence certaines stratégies fondées sur des preuves que les mères peuvent utiliser pour soutenir leur santé mentale pendant la pandémie et au-delà. Ces stratégies de santé mentale comprennent (1) L'auto-compassion et la pleine conscience (2) L'auto-soin physique (temps de sommeil et d'activité physique); (3) Temps de connexion (maintien des liens sociaux et des responsabilités partagées) ; et (4) La récréation (s'amuser!).

Keywords: Mothering, Academia, COVID-19 Pandemic, Mental Health

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Introduction

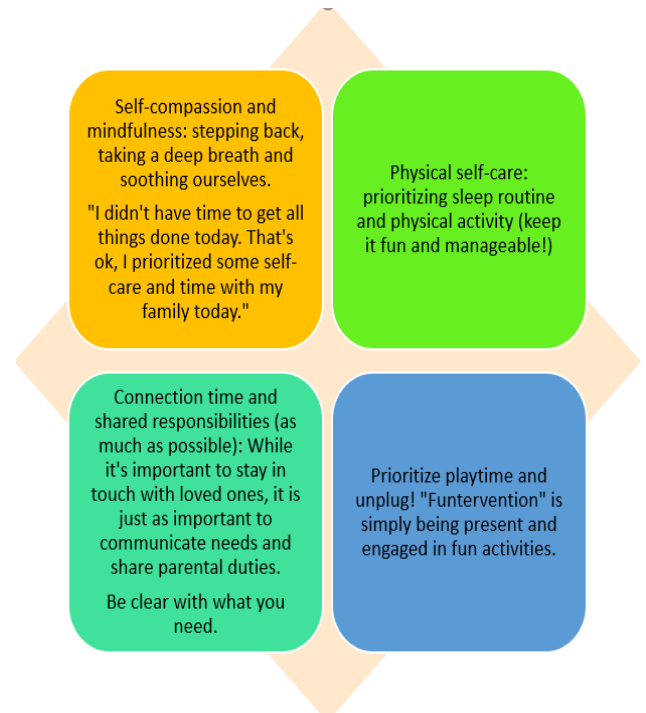
An Irish proverb says, “A woman is like a tea bag – you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water.” This, I feel, is the fierce strength that women have. When I think of this proverb, I feel empowered. And yet... the current pandemic has been quite a challenge in multitude of ways. From the challenges seen through social distancing and disruptions in relationships, to the inequities seen through socio-economic status and marginalized individuals. The current COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges for parents, with financial stressors and lack of childcare being at the forefront; stressors that are exacerbated for those families with children with developmental disabilities (Chafouleas & Iovino, 2021). Importantly, while research in Canada during the pandemic (Shafer et al., 2020) has showed that the gendered division of household labor has become increasingly more equal (at least during the early period of quarantine and remote work and schooling), it is important to also note that mothers were found to be more likely to take on home-school support. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic, mothers have been one-and-a-half times more likely to quit or lose their job (Andrew et al., 2020).

Not surprisingly, then, recent research by Racine and colleagues (2021) has found mothers to have significant struggles with mental health. Their research compared mothers’ mental health functioning prior to and during COVID-19, finding rates of depressive symptoms increasing from 19 per cent to 35 per cent during COVID-19 and rates of anxiety symptoms jumping from 18 per cent to 31 per cent. Notably, the majority of the mothers in this study (78%; N = 1017) indicated difficulty balancing home schooling with work and other responsibilities. I can wholeheartedly attest to these struggles.

There is significant research that indicates the well-being of mothers is critical for the optimal development of children and youth. While systemic changes are needed to create a more supportive environment for mothers to thrive, there are some things that we, as individuals, can do to build our resilience and help us not just survive but to thrive during this incessant pandemic. The model of

optimal mental health functioning that I discuss below is based on the “Healthy Mind Platter” developed by Rock, Siegel, Poelman, and Payne (2012). Given the added stressors of the pandemic, the healthy mind “diet” can help support our physical and mental well-being. Below I expand on the mental health benefits of four key activities: (1) Time-in (self-compassion and mindfulness); (2) Physical self-care (sleep and physical activity time); (3) Connecting time (maintaining social connections and shared responsibilities); and (4) Playtime (having fun!). A summary of these activities may be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Four Ways to Support Maternal Mental Health During the Pandemic and Beyond



1. Time In: Self-compassion and Mindfulness

Self-Compassion. I recently read the “*Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*” book by Dr. Kristin Neff (2021). In this book, Neff notes that self-compassion “isn’t just a good idea” but it is something we can do. It is simply about making the choice of building new habits and training our brain to respond to our pain and mistakes from a place of compassion.

Moreover, she describes self-compassion as a concept of yin and yang; the yin is the tender self-compassion that involves support and reassurance, while the yang is the fierce part of self-compassion, where we set our limits and take the action that feels right for us. That one I struggle with the most, as many women do. It is difficult to say “no” when asked to help with something. In fact, as a mother who carries infinite guilt for not being present with my kids “all” of the time, while also not being able to do as much as I wish I could at work, setting boundaries is particularly difficult. Personally, I find myself volunteering to do more and still not feeling like I’ve done enough. Not surprisingly, decades of research support the notion that this feeling of not doing “enough” is normal, a particularly common feeling working mothers experience.

So, what can we do about it? How do mothers who juggle so much already develop self-compassion (both tender and fierce) toward themselves during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond? Formal and informal ways of practicing self-compassion can be helpful. Ideally, at least initially, it is helpful to carve out a bit of time each day (e.g., built into bedtime routine) to practice self-compassion through meditation (resources such as Dr. Kristin Neff’s website may help). However, mothers are also busy, particularly with the added duties during this pandemic. To be honest, I was unable to practice this formal meditation every day and, thus, informal ways can be quite helpful. For example, in a moment where something has not gone according to plan, we may pause and take a deep breath, place a hand on the heart (or another part of our body that feels soothing) and respond to ourselves with kindness, reminding ourselves of the common humanity (e.g., “Everyone makes mistakes”). By responding to ourselves from a place of compassion, we are cultivating a less reactive and more mindful way of being with ourselves. In the long run, this makes a difference. While I may still beat myself up and feel guilty, I do so to a lesser degree. That, in itself, is significant and shifts my mood and perspective. More importantly, self-compassion allows me to respond more gently to my mistakes, which has also extended to others in my life; the acceptance that we are all human and we don’t always have to jump up and fix things immediately (as tempting as it may be).

Mindfulness. Building up from the place of self-compassion, there is growing evidence that mindfulness practice – the ability to be present - contributes to a better ability to plan, empathize, and emotionally regulate. Practicing mindfulness (formally and informally) each day has played an important role in my own ability to cope with all my duties as well as being able to better tune in to what I need and when I need it. This ability to take a pause and check in with myself (body and mind) has helped guide my own responses to others with more patience and empathy. That is not to say that practicing mindfulness has shifted everything for me, but the difference is noticeable in the way that I can tune in and respond from a more thoughtful place. Practicing mindfulness does not have to include a formal sit down as one may imagine. In fact, being a busy mother many times I focus my energy on more informal practice. For example, taking a deep breath in the moment and checking in with myself: What am I thinking? What am I feeling? Taking in our environment with all our senses when we take a walk is another great example of being present. Some days I enjoy being present with the silence (before my children awake or after they go to sleep). The pandemic has slowed the world a little, and some days it feels peaceful just to notice and bask in that quieter world. Finally, mindfulness has helped in my teaching in that I have grown to check in with students and slow my pace and focus based on the needs of the class.

2. Physical Self-Care

Sleep. Researchers have found reduced sleep increases risk of depression, as well as diabetes and other health problems. Importantly, sleep is considered to be an active state in that it contributes to better memory consolidation, learning, and coping with and processing emotions (Payne, 2011). Thus, prioritizing sleep can be quite helpful in boosting our mood as well as feeling more energized in general. Researchers recommend brief naps (i.e., 10 minutes) as an effective way to obtain these sleep benefits (Rock et al., 2012). I have attempted to make time for these brief naps, but they are not always feasible. Having a good bedtime routine has helped, such as turning off electronic devices about an hour before bed and engaging in relaxing activities. I also find journaling to be quite helpful in processing the day

and letting go of some of the “sticky” thoughts on my mind. In fact, journaling has been shown to help resolve challenging issues in our lives. At the end of the day, however, I always return to *self-compassion* because some days I will prioritize staying up later than I should. And that’s ok.

Physical Activity. Decades of research have now shown that exercise has an impact on our overall health and brain function. In fact, physical activity has been associated with brain plasticity throughout life (Alkadhi, 2018). With respect to how much exercise is beneficial, researchers suggest that while finding a balance of having moderate exercise is important, exercise becomes beneficial when it is regular. During the pandemic, there have been recommendations to engage in home-based exercises through online classes (Dwyer, Pasini, De Dominicis, & Righi, 2020).

At the same time, given the busy nature of being a working mother, physical activity is not typically at the forefront of priorities. My personal philosophy during the pandemic has been to do what works best for you. We want to keep physical activity as a positive association, and some of us are keener on physical activity than others. I am not much for formal exercise, for instance, but I do enjoy walks and hiking. Taking a moment out of our workday to move around enhances our mood and optimizes our brain functioning. For example, I have made efforts to take short walks outside as a small break during the day. Self-compassion is key here as well, since some days will be easier than others for physical activity. On the days that I am less active, I simply remind myself of all the things I had done while physically moving, such as lifting my baby and washing the dishes. That is still physical activity!

3. Connecting Time: Social Connections and Shared Responsibilities

There is no question that COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted family routines and social connections. These disruptions extend far and wide, from family celebrations (e.g., birthday parties) to larger community gatherings (e.g., weddings, funerals, religious holidays). Of course, such disruptions are even more prevalent for families that have experienced COVID-19 diagnosis

themselves and where loss and grief may be involved. Yet, research shows that the ability to develop some semblance of “normal,” while staying connected with family and support systems is an important protective factor in family well-being (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020). Being creative in staying connected during these challenging times is important. During lockdowns, for instance, virtual meet ups or sending a letter in the mail may help us feel connected. Random acts of kindness (e.g., bringing your neighbour some groceries or flowers) have been shown to increase our happiness and feelings of being connected to others. Another idea may be to join an online class or a support group to stay connected.

An important component of feeling supported is being able to share the various responsibilities related to home and schooling. Structural changes that promote paternal participation at home as well as increased availability of community-based care are very helpful with increases in shared housework and childcare. *Communication* with respect to sharing home and childcare responsibilities is also quite important. Researchers show that communicating about these topics and being able to hear each other’s needs is an important supportive factor that contributes to family well-being (Prime et al., 2020).

4. Playtime: Having Fun

An element that tired, overworked mothers may not typically think about is the idea of having fun. What does having fun even mean? It is the notion that we can allow ourselves to be silly, to play games with our children, and to laugh. Laughter and having fun not only boosts our mood in the moment, but it actually creates some fantastic physiological changes in our bodies, such as increasing our parasympathetic nervous system activity, which produces relaxation effects (Fujiwara & Okamura, 2018). Neuroscience research has shown that play is associated with release of dopamine, which contributes to a more positive mood, as well as to the development of increased creativity and learning (Rock et al., 2012).

Professor Laurie Santos, from Yale University, has argued that one of the best ways to optimize our mental health is by having more fun in our lives, which she refers to as “funtervention.” Fun means being actively engaged in something. Watching television or scrolling social media

is considered a passive activity. While this may have its place, true fun, according to Santos, is the ability to be present in an activity, such as being goofy with friends, making time for adventures and new experiences, and at the end of the day stepping out of our comfort zone to experience genuine excitement and laughter.

Realistically, making time for fun adventures is not always feasible given the busy days we typically have, particularly during the pandemic. At the same time, as Santos suggests, we can infuse fun in what she calls “microdoses” throughout our days. That is, finding opportunities throughout the day to smile and engage with others, reflect on what we value and try to take actions to get closer to these values. For instance, staying connected with colleagues has been challenging during the pandemic, so I have taken small steps to chat about fun things with them informally whenever we cross paths at work. I also make effort to “unplug” and just sit and play with my children. While this play time may not be as long as I often wish it could be, it feels good. As the well-known play author, Stuart Brown, puts it: “Those who play rarely become brittle in the face of stress or lose the healing capacity for humor.”

Finally, I find that this idea of having fun has also transposed into my teaching. For instance, not only do I have more fun coming up with creative lessons for my students, but the students have engaged with the material and appeared to enjoy the fun part of learning. This component of bringing fun into teaching has contributed to my own sense of confidence and enjoyment, despite the challenges of virtual education during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The pandemic has brought on much hardships and highlighted the many inequities in our lives, including the increasing workload for working mothers. Although systemic changes are clearly needed, this has also been a time for re-evaluation of values and a time to build on our strengths and resilience. Life can become more manageable when we take steps to remind ourselves of our shared humanity and find joy (big or small) in the everyday things. Routines, such as sleep and physical activity, *and* communication about shared responsibilities are important. At the same time, being

mindful of what is manageable and enjoying “microdoses” of fun, sleep, exercise or meditation throughout our days are a powerful way to deal with life one moment at a time. Lastly, while this paper focused on supporting mothers’ mental health during the pandemic, it is important to note that these key actions will continue to be important in the mental well-being of parents post-pandemic.

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