

Where You Are

S5 Episode 2 — Taking Care of Yourself: Parent & Caregiver Well-being

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Char Black: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith. When you think of feeling empowered as a parent or caregiver, what does it mean to you? Here at the Kelty Centre, some of the ways we think about empowered parenting include components like supporting your child's social and emotional development, building a community of support for when you need it, and taking care of yourself. Today on Where You Are, we zoom in on the topic of parent and caregiver well-being. As parents, we know well-being can often take a backseat, but making a conscious effort to prioritize your own mental health can not only make a real difference to your overall well-being, but also in how you may be able to show up for your family.

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Char Black: Together, we'll look at the concept of parent well-being in more detail, unpack misconceptions and common challenges that can come up for parents, as they try to prioritize their well-being, and discuss how strategies, like recognizing emotions, setting boundaries, and building support networks, might offer small practical ways to recharge and take care of your own mental health. Let's get into that conversation. Our first guest today on the podcast is Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana. Welcome to Where You Are.

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Thank you for having me. I'm really happy to be here with you today.

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Char Black: Dr. Tamana, you and your team helped us develop content on our Kelty Centre website focused on parent and caregiver well-being. Can you briefly speak about this concept and what we mean by it?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Yeah, so when we're talking about parent and caregiver well-being, we're really focusing on how parents give themselves a little bit of kindness and self-care and just take care of them each day, so that they can show up for their child in the best way

possible. So that was really the intention, I guess, behind developing the caregiver well-being section within the website.

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Char Black: Awesome. And Dr. Tamana, both Bryn and I are parents, so I think we both feel this way and probably Taryn as well, which you'll hear from in a minute. Do you think that there's a stigma that surrounds this concept of parent and caregiver well-being that parents constantly run up against?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: I think, sometimes, parents can see this as overindulging in something and taking time away from their family to do something for themselves. It might feel selfish. It might feel like, "I'm taking bubble baths and going on spa retreats and taking time away from my family," and that's not really the intention behind our caregiver wellness. And then, the other piece of that is that they might feel like, "Well, you're asking if I'm kind of coping," and that can feel a little bit uneasy or unnerving for a caregiver, because caregivers have a really tough job. It's the hardest job. Parenting is the toughest job in the world, because you really are expected to juggle a lot of different things. And so, when we're asking about wellness, it's really important to not check in on, "Are you coping?" but to be asked, "How are you feeling? How are you doing? How are things going for you?" That's kind of the way that I would approach that conversation to kind of eliminate any stigma around it. It's really important that we're just opening up that door to say, "Hey, if things are feeling a little bit tough right now, it's okay that you're feeling like that. It's pretty normal to feel like that, and let's check in on some of the things that we can do to help you out at this moment."

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Bryn Askwith: I also want to bring into the conversation Taryn, who's a mom of two amazing kids and has a lot on the go herself. Welcome to the show.

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Taryn: Thank you. Thank you for having me here.

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Bryn Askwith: Taryn, tell us a little bit about your story.

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Taryn: I am a parent of two elementary school aged children, both who've had struggles with their mental health over the last several years. Both of them are quite complex and very up and down with the course, and it really fell outside of the realm of what most professionals were experienced with. And so, as a result, a lot of the weight of that and supporting the kids has fallen on me, even though I'm married and have a parenting partner. But yeah, so that's where my frame of reference comes from.

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Bryn Askwith: We get a lot of parents and caregivers calling into the Kelty Center, and we do hear that as well, that supporting the kids can fall to one parent or another a bit more, depending on what's going on. And so, I wanted to also just focus in a little bit on your thoughts of how well-being has been an important part of your journey and what that means to you.

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Taryn: Yeah, so it's definitely an ever shifting and adjusting kind of process. The strategies that I'm using to take care of myself are really always a work in progress. So I do find having a balance, something creative, something active, and something for that social emotional realm. If I have all of those pieces, then things are definitely moving a little bit more smoothly. And for me, I really resonate with what Dr. Tamana said about it being the small things. I personally find having those real, what I would call micro breaks, it's those little pieces that I find really helpful. So specifically having an extra few minutes in the shower, just to enjoy the warm water over my head, being mindful, and just enjoying that moment. Or another one I've often done is taking a longer route home, extra five minutes to enjoy the scenery, or last night, it was look at the Christmas lights on my route home.

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Bryn Askwith: I love the examples you give, because they seem so doable. And as a parent of now kind of middle aged school kids, I remember being in the shower when they were little, because that was sometimes, if you were lucky, the only break you got in the day. And I love it as a strategy for individuals with younger kiddos.

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Char Black: That's also the thing I was thinking about when Taryn was talking. So I guess this is a theme. Dr. Tamana, can you talk about what does the latest evidence say about how parent well-being can impact their children and families?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Yeah, sure. When we think about the latest evidence, linking it to how it helps and supports your child's well-being, what we find is that, when a parent participates in even a small, I really love Taryn's term, of micro intervention, when they participate in doing that gradually over a few weeks or participate in a group, it really does show benefits for a child's well-being. And some of the reasons for that might be because we're modeling how we're doing some of these practices, and our child kind of sees, "Oh, mom, dad is taking a moment for themselves. I can take a moment for myself too when I feel a little bit overwhelmed or might be kind of struggling with my day to-day."

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Char Black: I want to go back to some of the misconceptions concerning parent and caregiver well-being that we mentioned earlier. Can you expand on what those misconceptions look like in our daily lives, as well as some barriers that we may often encounter in response to them?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Absolutely. I guess, in terms of other misconceptions, sometimes when we present this idea of caregiver wellness to a parent, they might say, "That sounds really great, but if I had extra time in my day, extra time in my week, I would love to be able to do that, but I just don't have that kind of space." So that's how we get into some of the barriers with a family, where they start to talk about lack of time. "It's really hard to carve out time. It's hard to find support to enable me to do some of these things." So maybe they don't have a partner and they're single parenting or maybe they don't have a network of support that could lend them a little bit of help. And so, when I start to discuss some of these barriers for the caregiver, I really break it down to we're really talking about really micro things that you could do and what's achievable week to week. So really setting up the parent to do something that they can achieve, that they can fit into their day.

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Bryn Askwith: The other thing I wanted to connect on today, and you both have briefly touched on this so far, but I want to unpack it a bit more, because I think it can be really helpful to our listeners. So let's focus in a bit more on the strategies now. So Dr. Tamana, let's start with you. What strategies do you share with parents and caregivers for prioritizing their needs or well-being?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: So usually, I start with the question of... Because I think it varies, self-care, from individual to individual. For some, it might be, "I just need a little bit more support. Just getting a little bit more support is self-care for me. I don't necessarily need to do more strategies." Or it might be, "I want to be able to set some boundaries here and only commit to the most important things." And so, I might work with someone to identify, what are the priorities, what are the things that we absolutely need to do week to week, and then, what are the things that are on the nice to do list? "These would be really nice to do for you, but I don't necessarily have to do them, unless I have the capacity or the time for that." Other strategies might be maybe a caregiver is really struggling emotionally, so they might say, "I've noticed myself feeling a bit more short with the people that I love in my life, and I don't feel good about that."

And that's where we start to explore, "Well, how about we start exploring your emotions and how you're feeling in those moments and how you can identify the way that you're feeling?" And then, we might discuss what could be some good strategies for coping with some of these emotions. Sometimes it's really difficult to reflect on that in the moment, and I find that caregivers say, "Well, that's a really nice thing to say to me, but when you're in it and everything's happening around you, I can't even fathom how I'm going to start reflecting on how that made me feel." And so, a really nice exercise to do is to actually write it down later at a different time where it works for you, just pull out a piece of paper, and you say, "This was really tough this week." And then, you start to reflect on how that made me feel.

So you might rate that, "This was like a 10 for me and I might want to work on the me piece of this." Because sometimes really challenging things come up and you can't fix or control

everything that's happening around you, but if you can really center on how it makes you feel and get control over that, that really helps to create a pause and create how you're responding to something, so that you can move yourself out of feeling frustrated or really guilty about how you might've responded in that moment and into a place where you feel good about yourself. And then, other things that I kind of recommend is it really helps to practice, if breathing works for you, if you practice it first, then you can reach into that tool when you're in that moment, when it comes up for you next. The more you create opportunities to practice some of these skills, which can look like just two minutes a day, it really helps that, when you're in that moment, you can pull to that strategy a bit more easier.

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Char Black: I'm curious, Taryn, about what Dr. Tamana was saying, what, of the areas that she talked about, resonates with you, in terms of recognizing and managing emotions? I know you talked about some self-care pieces, as well as the setting boundaries. So what of those areas do you think you'd rely on more to support your well-being?

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Taryn: Yeah, definitely lots of what Dr. Tamana was saying resonates for me. I think that having that social connection, I think one of the things that will fall off the plate early will be getting together with friends or whatnot. So sometimes, I have to remind myself, "Okay, it's a good time to text a friend, even if it's just someone who has a similar lived experience," and I can just text an "Ah" or something that just kind of connects and diffuses a little bit. Or it might be a phone call with a family member or something like that or setting up a time to get together.

So keeping those friend and family connections. And it's not always about complaining or whatever, but I think there are a few people in your network, usually, that can feel those little emergency situations and help you to regulate again. The other one definitely in the idea of taking things off your plate is lowering your standards a little bit. Sometimes, it's like, "I'm going to leave the dishes after dinner because I need to go for a walk or I need to do something for myself. It'll still be there when I get back." But yeah, sometimes, I'm okay with just leaving something untidy and not worrying about trying to do everything all at once and all the time.

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Char Black: You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Char Black. To learn more about parent and caregiver well-being, check out the Empowered Parenting section on our website at keltymentalhealth.ca/empowered-parenting. Are you busy and overwhelmed supporting your child's mental health and wellness? And could you use someone to talk to, who can relate? Contact a trained Kelty parent peer support worker, who can offer a non-judgmental listening ear and connect you to mental health resources in your community. Connect by phone, email, or via Zoom. Find out more at keltymentalhealth.ca/contact-us.

So Taryn, as we all know, parenting is a 24/7 endeavor with lots on our plates, and feeling emotionally exhausted and feeling a bit disconnected sometimes and having moments where your own needs aren't being met seems like something that most parents would've experienced

at one point or another through their parenting journey. Was this ever a part of your experience? And what helped in those kinds of moments where you were really feeling exhausted and disconnected?

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Taryn: Yeah. What comes to mind for me is there was several months, about a year and a half in total, where my kids were out of traditional schooling, and I was juggling the home learning and I was juggling the therapy programs. I was juggling medical stuff and waiting lists, and it really was overwhelming. And I would find myself sort of crying suddenly over seemingly small unrelated things, like a dish would fall out of the cupboard and smash on the floor, and I was in tears over it. And it obviously was nothing to do with the dish. I could care less about the broken dish, but all the things that had piled up. And my cup was super full. And then, that was just that one thing that tipped things over.

So shouldering all of that all of the time and not really having support or breaks from all of it, I just knew that I needed to enlist some more help, particularly medical and school-wise, and I knew that it was really dependent on me to be at my best self or be my best self, in order to be able to advocate for that help. So it's counterintuitive. I needed to work on myself before I could even advocate for the support for my kids. So just little by little, started to put a few more of those strategies in place and being mindful about what I was, each day, going to take on and what I was going to drop off the plate, and just sort of really tried to focus in on myself and what I could do for myself. So that then, therefore, I could get some more help.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Tamana, do you have anything to add to what Taryn's saying? I'm hearing talk about feeling that overwhelm and exhaustion, and I'm just thinking, as parents, we've all had those moments. So at what point, when you're supporting families, do you speak to parenting caregiver burnout and signs around that? And what steps people can do to address it?

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Yeah, so some of what Taryn touched on really did make me think about burnout, when we're just doing so many things and we pushed ourselves to a point where we're not able to care for ourselves anymore and we're just doing too too much without having enough resources or supports in place. And not seeing our own needs being met can really lead to burnout. And so, some of the signs is being emotionally exhausted and feeling like you're disconnected from your caregiving role. So, "I'm not feeling joyful in this moment anymore. I'm feeling like I don't have enough capacity for my child right now." You get to that kind of a point, where it just feels really overwhelming for me, and you're finding yourself feeling really down or experiencing sadness or just not sleeping the greatest, because you're worrying all the time. That's when you have to start to think, "Is this burnout? Do I need to start thinking about getting some extra help?" And so, some steps around that that I would suggest is one might be to look at how much support you're getting. So sometimes, when you're feeling burnt out, it's just enough to start creating some boundaries, start connecting to old friends that you haven't

spoken to for a long time, because you just haven't had the time for that. And start building some of the supports that you might need. The other piece around that might be, if you don't have anyone that's available to you, then you could call the Kelty Mental Health Center. I really do highly recommend the Parent Peer Support Line, because you just get to hear from someone with some empathy. And you don't have to feel like you have to go straight to a professional. It's a really nice first step with a, "This is how I'm feeling, what can I do with this?"

Sometimes if you have a really good family doctor or your kiddo's pediatrician, that you can share this with them, during that appointment, sometimes them listening to you in that moment can really help relieve some of the things that you might be struggling through. And then, if you're really experiencing some of this, and maybe you've been feeling like that persistently for a couple of weeks, maybe it's been a few months by now, that's where you might want to start considering reaching out to a professional and booking in some of that counseling. And there's not a one size fit all for counseling. So many caregivers will say, "I've tried counseling. I went to see a therapist, and they just weren't understanding of my situation." Perhaps they didn't understand what they're going through or they don't have enough knowledge around their child's special healthcare needs or how their mental health needs and what that really requires of a parent when they have to step up into that role to support them through that. And so, my recommendation is always to not give up on therapy because the first counselor or therapist or psychologist didn't fit for you. Explore other options. Sometimes speaking to other people that have gone through the same things that you are going through can be really beneficial as well. So like connecting to parent support programs. For example, the Foundry has peer parenting support groups, and it's just other parents that are going through similar things to you. There might be people that you know through a local organization that you're connected to, where you can just meet for coffee. I really do encourage, when you start to notice that, "This is no longer manageable for me. I can't just use those strategies, those go-to things, that's not helping me," that's where you want to start to think about reaching out for more support from a professional.

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Bryn Askwith: Yeah, I really like how you underscore the difference there, when the strategies don't seem to be working, and that the difference between those moments of feeling exhausted and disconnected, because I think we all have those as parents and caregivers sometimes, versus those consistent ongoing feelings of overwhelm and disconnect and needing to connect to more resources. Speaking of resources, you've mentioned a few of them. Thank you. The parent peer support workers at the Kelty Center are amazing, and thank you for highlighting their non-judgmental, compassionate listening ear. You also mentioned connecting with the GP, Foundry, so I'll add all those into our show notes for the episode. But Taryn, are there any resources that you would like to highlight that you've found helpful?

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Taryn: Yeah, just to build upon the parent peer support. So FamilySmart has a parent peer support workers in a number of communities, and sometimes, their area geographically can be a little bit more extensive than the city that they are attached to. And then, of course, if there isn't someone for your community, going to the Kelty Center Parent Peer Support Line, I've

used both of those resources many times. They were very helpful. One thing I really liked about it was there was no waiting. It was like an immediate response. Definitely having a counselor, like a professional person, for certain topics, is really, really helpful, but I agree it does have to be the right fit.

And then, for myself, I also find some of the online support groups, and often, they're sort of diagnosis specific or what have you, but I think that those have their place. It's not going to cover everything, but often, those are the parents that have a very similar path that they've walked. And so, sometimes, it can be just someone that gets it, knowing when to go there versus when to go to your professional support or your parent peer support person or your GP, if it's affecting your health, I've been there too where it's overlapping into my own physical health and mental health, but that there's a place for all of those things. And I think just knowing sort of which one to reach out to at what point.

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Char Black: Great. So I'm going to move us into our last question. So on all our podcast episodes, we ask our guests to provide their words of wisdom. So Taryn and Dr. Tamana, can you share a few words of wisdom for our listeners?

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Taryn: Two things for me to take home, it doesn't need to be big like a spa vacation. Those micro breaks really do add up. And the second, it doesn't have to be perfect. We're aiming for progress over perfection. And often, those mistakes, like we teach our kids, mistakes are good, and that's how we learn and how we grow. So don't be afraid to try something different. And if it didn't work the first time, don't be afraid to try it again, because it might work the next time you try it.

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Really prioritizing your own well-being really will support how you connect with your child too. So just keeping that in mind, that what you're doing to benefit yourself is ultimately going to be benefiting your child as well. And I think the other piece is there's no shame or stigma. Every parent is in a very similar boat, and you might feel that everyone else seems to be doing parenting perfectly and that they're nailing it and that you might not feel like that's happening for you. But the truth of the matter is that everyone has their own wins in parenting and some of their small or big losses or things that are challenging, and it really shows up at different pressure points in parenting, but just knowing that you and your child are in it together and that you and other parents are in it together as well. So don't ever feel afraid or ashamed to reach out for a little bit more support.

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Bryn Askwith: Thank you so much to you both for making the time to be here with us on the podcast. I know it's given me lots to think about. And I really like your point, Taryn, about revisiting a strategy if it doesn't work the first time. That's a takeaway for me for sure. So thank you very much.

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Dr. Sukhpreet Tamana: Yeah, thank you so much for having me today.

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Taryn: Thank you.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks to our Where You Are listeners for tuning in today. We're grateful to have you join us each episode.

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