

Self-Care and Burnout Prevention Quick Reference for Parent Advocates



Burnout Warning Signs - Check Yourself

Physical Signs

- ☐ Chronic fatigue despite adequate sleep
- ☐ Frequent headaches or muscle tension
- ☐ Getting sick more often than usual
- ☐ Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- ☐ Feeling physically exhausted after meetings

Emotional Signs

- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed or helpless regularly
- ☐ Increased irritability with family/school staff
- ☐ Crying more frequently or feeling numb
- ☐ Dreading school meetings or communications
- ☐ Feeling like nothing you do makes a difference

Behavioral Signs

- ☐ Withdrawing from family, friends, or support groups
- ☐ Neglecting personal needs or health
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- ☐ Increased conflict with spouse/partners
- ☐ Using alcohol, food, or other substances to cope

If you checked 3+ items in any category, prioritize self-care immediately.

Emergency Self-Care (Under 10 Minutes)

Quick Reset Techniques

- **Box Breathing:** 4 counts in, hold 4, out 4, hold 4 (repeat 5 times)
- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding:** Name 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste
- **Cold Water Reset:** Splash cold water on face and wrists
- **Progressive Muscle Release:** Tense shoulders for 5 seconds, release and notice the difference
- **Positive Affirmation:** "I am doing my best for my child. That is enough."

Micro-Breaks During Stressful Days

- Step outside for 2 minutes of fresh air
 - Listen to one favorite song with headphones
 - Do 10 jumping jacks or stretch
 - Text a supportive friend
 - Look at photos that make you smile
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Daily Protection Strategies

Morning Armor (5-10 minutes)

- **Set 1-3 realistic goals** for the day (not 10)
- **Review your "why":** Remember your child's strengths and your love for them
- **Boundaries check:** What will you NOT do today?
- **Energy assessment:** Rate energy 1-10 and plan accordingly

Evening Decompression

- **Transition ritual:** Change clothes, wash hands, take 3 deep breaths
 - **Daily wins:** Name 1 thing that went well, however small
 - **Tomorrow's focus:** Choose 1 priority for tomorrow (only 1)
 - **Gratitude practice:** Identify 1 thing you're grateful for
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When to Ask for Help - No Shame Zone

Call/Text a Support Person When:

- You're crying in the school parking lot
- You're dreading every school communication
- You're snapping at family members regularly
- You haven't slept well in over a week
- You're questioning your advocacy abilities

Professional Help Indicators:

- Persistent sadness or anxiety for 2+ weeks
- Thoughts of self-harm or "disappearing"
- Substance use increasing
- Unable to enjoy anything anymore
- Physical symptoms without medical cause

Crisis Resources: 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), Text HOME to 741741 (Crisis Text Line)



Building Your Support Ecosystem

Your Inner Circle (2-3 people max)

- **The Listener:** Someone who lets you vent without giving advice
- **The Cheerleader:** Reminds you of your strengths and wins
- **The Practical Helper:** Offers concrete assistance (meals, childcare, research)

Your Outer Support Ring

- **Parent mentor** who's been through similar challenges
- **Professional advocate** for complex issues
- **Healthcare provider** who understands your child's needs
- **Online support group** for 24/7 connection

Boundaries with Well-Meaning People

When someone says: "God only gives special needs kids to special parents"

Your response: "Thank you" (then internally: "That's not helpful right now")

When someone asks: "Have you tried [random suggestion]?" **Your response:** "We're working with professionals on that"



Time and Energy Management Hacks

The Advocacy Schedule

- **High-energy tasks** (IEP meetings, research): When you're freshest
- **Low-energy tasks** (filing, organizing): When you're tired
- **No-advocacy zones**: Evenings after 7pm, weekend mornings, vacation days

The "Good Enough" Rule

- **Perfect IEP prep**: 3+ hours researching every detail
- **Good enough IEP prep**: 1 hour reviewing current goals and 3 priority concerns
- **Remember**: Progress over perfection

Batch Similar Tasks

- **Email responses**: Check/respond 2x daily, not constantly
 - **Phone calls**: Make all school calls during one 30-minute block
 - **Research**: Set timer for 1 hour max per topic
 - **Documentation**: 15 minutes daily vs. 3-hour weekend marathons
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Recharging Your Advocacy Energy

Weekly Non-Negotiables (Choose 2)

- ☐ 30-minute walk in nature
- ☐ Phone call with supportive friend/family
- ☐ One hour doing something just for you
- ☐ Date night or meaningful time with partner
- ☐ Physical activity that you enjoy
- ☐ Creative outlet (art, music, writing)
- ☐ Spiritual practice or meditation

Monthly Advocacy Fuel

- ☐ Connect with another parent who "gets it"
- ☐ Attend online support group or webinar
- ☐ Read one inspiring advocacy story
- ☐ Celebrate one advocacy win (however small)
- ☐ Learn one new strategy or resource

Quarterly Big Picture Reset

- ☐ Review what's working in your advocacy
 - ☐ Identify what's draining your energy unnecessarily
 - ☐ Update your support team
 - ☐ Plan one weekend completely focused on family fun
 - ☐ Assess if you need professional help or additional resources
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Mindset Shifts for Sustainable Advocacy

From → To

- "I must fix everything" → "I advocate for appropriate supports"
- "If I don't do it, no one will" → "I can ask for and accept help"
- "I'm failing my child" → "I'm learning and growing as an advocate"
- "This should be easier" → "This is hard, and I'm handling it"
- "I have to fight everyone" → "I look for allies and build relationships"

Advocacy Mantras for Tough Days

- "My child is lucky to have me as their advocate"
 - "I don't have to be perfect to be effective"
 - "Every small step forward matters"
 - "It's okay to rest and recharge"
 - "I am more than my child's disability advocate"
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Emergency Self-Care Kit

Create a physical or digital kit with:

- **Contact list:** 3 people you can call for support
- **Comfort items:** Photos, music playlist, favorite tea, essential oil
- **Quick mood boosters:** Funny videos, inspirational quotes, gratitude list
- **Professional contacts:** Therapist, doctor, crisis hotline numbers
- **Permission slips:** Written reminders it's okay to say no, take breaks, ask for help

Location: Keep in car, purse, or easily accessible on phone



Weekly Self-Care Check-In (2 minutes)

Rate each area (1-5 scale, 5 = excellent):

- Physical energy: ____
- Emotional wellbeing: ____
- Relationship connections: ____
- Advocacy effectiveness: ____
- Personal fulfillment: ____

If any area is 3 or below: Choose one specific action this week to improve it.

This week I will prioritize: _____

This week I will say no to: _____

This week I need help with: _____



Remember Your "Why"

On the hardest days, remember:

- You are your child's first and most important advocate
- Your love and persistence make a real difference
- Other families benefit from your advocacy efforts
- You are modeling resilience and self-advocacy for your child
- You don't have to be perfect - you just have to keep showing up

Your advocacy matters. Your wellbeing matters. You matter.

Emergency Reminder: If you're having thoughts of self-harm, call 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or go to your nearest emergency room. Your family needs you healthy and whole.