



# Help for the Exhausted Parent

*What do I do when I'm just exhausted?*

## Looking in on E-mails

Hey Mom and Dad,

I remember when the kids were really young, and I was meeting myself coming and going changing diapers, doing laundry, preparing food for picky eaters, shopping for a growing family, and sitting up nights with sore throats, croupy coughs, and spiking fevers; you told me to "enjoy the kids while they're young." I didn't pay much attention to your words because it seemed that I was too worn out with parenting 101. Now, I look back and think I should have explored more of your wisdom. I thought parenting young children was a tiring experience; I didn't anticipate the stress associated with parenting tweens and teens.

2 tired 2 . . . LUV, Kim

Hey, Kim,

Mom and I read your e-mail and were a little concerned. During our morning coffee we made a little quiz for you. Do you . . .

1. Feel tired but have trouble going to sleep?
2. Find yourself snapping and snapping at the ones you love most?
3. Consider everything you do a "job"?

4. Find little or no time for enjoying and celebrating "you"?

5. Think you are not meeting goals?

6. Find yourself resentful of time spent in "taking care of . . . "?

Love you back, Dad

Hey Dad,

Affirmative on all six! Help!

Dear Kim,

If you answered "yes" to all of our questions, maybe you are experiencing parent exhaustion. Please explore your life. Wish we lived closer. Mom and Dad

Hey,

"Exhaustion" sounds so out of control. I'm just tired. Things will settle down.

Gotta go, Kim

Kim, your Dad and I have tried to tell you that you can't control everything! Dad looked up "exhaustion" in the dictionary and it says it's a state of extreme physical and mental tiredness. Is that you?

Love you, Mom and Dad

## Causes of Exhaustion

When exploring books and blogs about the exhausted parent, you find that primarily the texts are directed to parents of newborns, infants, and young children. Scattered among these texts are helps for the exhausted parent of a child with special challenges, but there are few resources that acknowledge the exhaustion of a parent of a teen. There are many "How to Talk about \_\_\_\_\_ with Your Teen" resources, but what about the parent of a teen(s) who suffers from fatigue, tiredness, weariness, and energy loss? Parenting through the transitions of the developmental stages of a child takes thought, time, and much energy.

As the e-mail from Kim's parents indicates, exhaustion is more than merely feeling tired. Experiencing fatigue, lethargy, and a general listlessness sends a signal that we're experiencing more than merely being tired. Exhaustion is extreme and extends to the physical, mental, and spiritual being of our core.

It seems that the more energy we spend on careers, household work, trying to stretch income to cover expenses, community, school, and

church involvement, and the trends that the media convinces us are “musts” if we want to be successful, the more we experience the feelings of underachievement, disorganization, and weariness. Famous entertainers and sports figures cancel appearances “due to exhaustion,” but what about parents? Would we even know how or where to start to slow down? Would we feel guilty? unable to measure up?

It's difficult to sort out physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion as they are so related; often a simple incident can cause a domino effect resulting in energy loss. Suppose you are a member of a task team of three members and have a deadline for your project. In your opinion, one of the three is focused on creative ideas but has no clue on how to implement those ideas. The second member seems to be undependable in assigned tasks. The deadline is nearing, and you feel stress and tension. It's an important task team, and you're afraid that a less-than-perfect report will

of cumulative experiences of a lifestyle or because of a situation that has consumed an abundant amount of your time and senses.

Fear and worry can exhaust you, and let's face it: being a parent of a teen offers many opportunities for both fear and worry. Worry and fears that accompanied parenting the preteen child seem not so bad in retrospect to a parent of a teen. In fact, parents of a teen sometimes wish they had the supervisory security they felt when parenting a young child. Bedtime was bedtime. You provided both food and drink. Transportation was provided by family. The parent of a teen has a list of worries: car accidents, choices that could be life ending or changing, unprotected sex, and drug and alcohol abuse. You hope you have prepared your child in making wise decisions and seeking a healthy life. You pray that you have been a good model, but you wonder as you see choices present themselves to your teen. You have a

unique physical make-up seems to be. There is not such an indicator for parenting a teen. As a teen grows, so does her world. The baseline indicators change with the many challenges and opportunities a teen encounters. Add to this the explosion of technology. It's comforting to know that you and your teen can communicate if need be. On the other hand, the constant communication that often goes on between parent and teen means that you as a parent are always “on”—always available. This means there is no down time for a parent. It also means that you are having a difficult time letting go of a soon-to-be young adult.

Last, but not least, are you setting unrealistic goals for yourself that are constantly draining you of energy? Do you leave any unstructured time for yourself? Is every minute of your life “accounted” for in order to accomplish, establish, achieve, succeed, promote, attain, complete, reach, pull off, or please? Setting unrealistic goals or allowing others to set goals for you can lead to a feeling of always “not doing enough.” This draining self-assessment can damage your feeling of self-worth and zap your joy and energy. The feeling that “the more you do the more there is to do” is a red flag that should be explored immediately. This is especially true in today's uncertain economic environment when we are being forced to prioritize what we need to do and what we want to do.

## **How to Approach Exhaustion**

result in devaluation of your position. You find you're experiencing difficulty in sleeping, arguing with your partner, losing patience with your teens, and yesterday you were curt with your pastor when she phoned to ask you to chair a committee. As a result you are physically tired, worried about your job, ashamed of your outbursts, and overwhelmed with how to put all the pieces together and mend relationships with those you care about most. You are at a loss, wanting to find that place within that has always given you peace and solace. Physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion can be the result

difficult time in trusting and respecting that the time has come to move from the “supervising parent” to the “supportive parent.” The transition from one parental role to the other is awesome, scary, and undefined. The uncertainty of a parent's role in this “letting go” affords numerous opportunities for exhaustion.

Not being able to determine “what is normal” or the “baseline” for parenting teens can also present worry and concern. Health-care professionals encourage us to have certain tests to indicate what our normal baseline in

If you answered in the affirmative to any or all of the six questions from Kim's parents, the first thing to do is to determine if there is a medical cause for your exhaustion. Have you told your physician or licensed nurse practitioner that you feel exhausted?

Some simple blood tests can determine if there are contributing health issues to your extreme fatigue. Have you told your partner that you are constantly exhausted? This needs to be done in a manner that doesn't point a finger at your partner as the cause for your fatigue or that he isn't doing his part. Have you shared with your teen that you are feeling extremely tired all the time? Again this should be stated in a sharing environment, not a time when tempers or emotions are in an accusatory mode.

If you haven't done any of the former, perhaps you haven't really "named" what you are experiencing. If you haven't named it or owned it, most likely you are still contributing to more exhaustion. Now you know where to start. Your goal is not to be able to do more; your goal is your well-being.

In a July 2009 article for the *New York Times*, Michelle Slatalla reports that the Sloan Work and Family Research Network reveals that adults, age 30 to 49, are living the most structured, demanding lives. They work the most hours of any age group. Slatalla points out that this is the same age group who has teenagers.<sup>1</sup>

After you've talked with your health-care professional, take a time-out to look at your schedule for a week. After listing all the things you do in a week's time ask yourself the following:

- What responsibilities can be shared with someone else?
- What tasks seem to overlap?
- What things bring good feelings?
- What things bring bad feelings?
- What things do I have trouble focusing on?

- What things do I look forward to?
- What relationships constantly seem to drain, not uplift?
- What items seem like "jobs" but give no compensation?

Think about how you've responded to the questions. Do some of your responses call for you to establish some boundaries? For example, we are aware that the "age of volunteerism" has peaked and is on a downward spiral. This is true for schools, civic organizations, and churches. The trouble is that organizations and institutions have been supported by volunteers but haven't transformed into a new entity or paradigm. The result is they call on fewer available people for the tasks once staffed by many volunteers. So even though you are a member of a faith community and want to be

"Too much stuff" is also related to the boundaries issue. When you look at a week of your life, how much of what you do concerns "stuff"? We spend a lot of time and energy on buying, repairing, storing, cleaning, updating, and displaying things. We have so much stuff that we rent storage outside our homes to put it in. "Stuff" is an awesome responsibility. Being a parent of a teen automatically means more "stuff." Marketing informs us daily that our teen and we, as parents of teens, truly need more in order to be happy, smart, connected, and good looking. Management of such things can be exhausting. It's time to prune so much stuff from your life.

Get a handle on the noise in your life. What does it tell you if you: turn on a TV when entering a room, walk or run with iPod plugs, always have your cell

## **When you look at a week of your life, how much of what you do concerns "stuff"?**

involved in your child's school and are aware of the need for help in the local drives, you must realize how much time these worthwhile events and committees consume. Ask yourself, Does saying "yes" to serving on one committee or board automatically place me on a number of related subcommittees? If so, you may wish to think about your answer. Before you commit yourself to a volunteer position explore if it's what you plan, envision, or anticipate. Talk not only to present members but also to outgoing members to gain insight into the required time and energy.

or beeper on? Is your quiet time accompanied by something programmed by someone else? For some people, music or other ambient noise can help mood and motivation, but for *all* of us there are times when even good ambient noise just masks what we're really feeling. Ask yourself: when is the moment during the day that you hear your heart, your breathing, your own pulse? Those sounds are the music of your life that only you can orchestrate. Do you hear it?

Letting go is probably the best thing we can do to restore health and wholeness

1. Michelle Slatalla, "Relax, I'm Honing My Skills," *New York Times*, July 8, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/fashion/09spy.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1249054116-OjoSFCotoMuQgPsMJUG0xA](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/fashion/09spy.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1249054116-OjoSFCotoMuQgPsMJUG0xA) or Google author name and New York Times and date. Article is accessible.

to our well-being. It is also one of the most difficult things to do. This is especially true for the parent of a teen. So much of our preparation for and beginning of parenthood is connected to preventing harm, nurturing health, managing lives, and doing what is best for our child that it's perplexing when we gradually relinquish those facets of our child's life to the maturing teen. There's no specific time, no prescribed ritual, no computerized model that sep-

arates when it's "our call" or our "teen's call." It comes gradually, and hopefully with respect and mutual communication. If we're lucky, we occasionally can hear what may be words of praise or approval from our teen. As a parent, teach yourself to hear praise and give praise. Let go of the agonizing thoughts that surround, "Did I do the right thing?" Get rid of the intake of bad news. Let go of being enticed to the headlines that scream doom, disaster,

and destruction. Seek a starting place to invite calmness into your life.

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## For More Information

For a thoughtful book about spiritual life and disciplines, read Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995)

For a short, interesting article encouraging more exercise in helping physical exhaustion go to: <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/the-cure-for-exhaustion-more-exercise/>.

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# Discussing This Topic with Your Teen

- Invite your teen to take some time to list the events of his past week while you list the events of your week. Compare lists. Then both of you place a plus sign beside those experiences that gave you energy or felt uplifting. Place a minus sign beside those experiences that seemed to take energy. Share how you reached such determinations. Explore if there are solutions to turn around or eliminate some of the situations that seem to drain energy.
- Help your teen prioritize events that take time by sharing what tasks and “stuff” you would reorganize or eliminate as taking too much of your time and energy.
- Talk about where and when you absorb the bad news of the world. Reflect whether you have control over these events. Consider the harm to your person by hearing or viewing such events repeated in media loops.
- Plan a time each week when you are not “doing” but “being” together. This could be a simple activity. How about agreeing that at a certain hour this Thursday, the two of you are going to compare hands: the skin, lines, nails, calluses, and scars. Five funky minutes of “being” together.
- Encourage one another to appreciate quiet time, when phones, iPods, and TV are turned off and our senses are tuned on and programmed by us—not by a commercial market.

# Reflection Questions for Parents

**Take some time quietly by yourself to reflect on these questions.**

- Think about all the decisions you make in a day. Some are simple; for example, what to wear. Consider how much time and energy you spend on making what should be a simple decision. If you find that you have tried several sweaters, shoes, or slacks before deciding this is the best you can do, consider if you have too many choices. Rank your decisions under the following headings: Should Be Simple, Fairly Average, or Seems Serious. Then analyze if you are spending too much time on simple decisions in order to avoid the decisions that need some serious research and help. Having something hanging over your head can drain energy, which makes even easy decisions difficult. Procrastination doesn't provide energy.
- What can you do to help relieve stress in your body? Try one week when you set aside a place and time to meditate, do yoga, journal, or exercise. Go to your public library and check out some DVDs on yoga or tai chi. Read about meditation and breathing exercises. Be faithful in your one-week, trial routine. After one week, evaluate how you feel. Do you need to be more intentional about de-stressing?
- What's "normal" for your well-being? How much sleep do you personally need to feel refreshed? Do you feel better eating five times a day or three times a day? How much alcohol do you consume? Do you have certain foods that make you sleepy? Peppy? Are you aware that wearing certain colors makes you feel good? How do you prepare yourself for sleep? Reading? TV? Music? Can you develop a baseline for what is normal for you? Do you push yourself beyond that baseline?
- Consider this question: Am I always available? If so, is that good for me? Is it necessary?
- Seek out a place—outside, if possible—that feels interesting, beautiful, or comforting to you. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes, and beginning with the top of your head and moving downward, relax your muscles. Enjoy releasing the tight lines around your eyes and mouth. Feel the freedom of letting go of the heavy burdens that make your shoulders ache. As you continue the journey downward, give thanks for organs and sexuality. Get your toes excited that "you're coming to them." Ask your body to be patient that you're celebrating every component. After checking in with your toes and while your eyes are still closed, slowly lift your hands to form a frame in front of your face. Slowly open your eyes. Look only through the stationery frame formed by your hands. Let your eyes rest on everything within the frame. When you are aware of the silence and peace within your being, let your hands slowly fall to rest. Spend one moment breathing in the word "good" and exhaling "exhaustion."

# Discussion Questions for a Group of Parents

- Exchange ideas on how to un-involve yourself in time-consuming committees and meetings.
- Make a group list of resources on how to de-stress or simplify the life of a parent of a teen. Add to the list authors, titles, DVDs, therapists, and Web sites.
- Discuss how you can support one another. Do you feel comfortable discussing specific issues that weigh one another down? Do you need to make a covenant of confidentiality with one another?
- What can you do for one another during the week that does not necessitate a lot of time but affirms one another?  
*Please: do not forward a ton of funny e-mails!*
- Encourage everyone to make a baseline for what is normal for an individual's well-being. Share the results and see if each person can gain insight for new ways to consider what is normal for that individual.

Note: In gathering a group of parents of teens to discuss "exhaustion," don't make the gathering one more item to add to the things that exhaust you. Some things you may keep in mind are: the smaller the group, the less time is spent on scheduling; be careful not to turn the gathering into a labor-intensive event; don't turn the gathering into a "blame your partner or your teen" group.