

Early Childhood Leaders: Mental Health Care is for Everyone

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The significant changes in the world have impacted the early childhood education field and increased the need for leaders to embrace flexibility and new ways of doing things. It is essential that early childhood leaders find healthy ways to deal with the changing landscape of society and the impacts on their programs and the children and families that are served. Change starts with taking care of one's own mental health. To manage changes and thrive, early childhood leaders need self-care strategies, skills, and supports.

I was one of the directors impacted by the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. Shortly after 9:01 a.m., I was in my car racing toward the dark smoke, along with two Oklahoma Highway Patrol cars. I knew it was bad when I was driving over 100 miles per hour toward downtown and the police never acknowledged my excessive speed. I maneuvered behind them, and within minutes, I arrived at my program.

The teachers and children, including my son, were standing on the playground staring at the plume of dark smoke that was six blocks south of our location. As I jumped out of the car, the children were pointing and yelling, "Look, Ms. Jane. It's a volcano!" The teachers were speechless. Business and car alarms were going off, debris was swirling and falling out of the air, and emergency response vehicles were flying past our location to get to the site of the disaster.

As I gazed around our child care program building, which looked intact, all I could think was to get everyone secure inside and engaged in everyday activities, so I could figure out what was going on. With staff looking to me for leadership, I instructed everyone, "Get in your classrooms, and get an activity started. Shut your classroom doors, and we're going to get through this day."

As the leader of our early childhood program, I was faced with a catastrophic event – one for which I had no experience, formal education, or training. This historic tragedy impacted several early childhood education programs and led to new standards of emergency preparedness. It also highlighted the importance of mental health services for those working in the field of early childhood.

In the same way, the pandemic and current world events have introduced a time of fear and uncertainty. Early childhood leaders can prioritize mental health and begin by taking care of themselves. Below are recommendations and strategies to help navigate challenging times.

- [Keep hope alive](#). Establish and maintain a clear sense of purpose; locate colleagues who model positive solutions. Do what you *can* do, and perform small acts of kindness towards others.

- **[Create an emotionally comfortable environment](#)**. Show compassion for yourself. Strategies include keeping a daily “self-gratitude” journal, picking a day to identify critical internal messages and change those to supportive messages, and working with an accountability partner.
- **[Recognize when you and others are struggling](#)**. Some of the most common warning signs of stress are loss of appetite and weight, excessive eating and weight gain, memory issues, lack of engagement with others, and excessive crying or flashes of anger. It is important to monitor those signs in yourself and others.
- **[Engage and empower yourself](#)**. [Reduce Stress](#) suggests critical reflection as a helpful way to self-monitor. Questions include:
 - What is something that was hard for me today?
 - Where can I find support?
 - What is something I am grateful for?
 - What am I looking forward to?
- **[Embrace an abundance mindset](#)**. [Brené Brown](#) suggests centering oneself to become more aware of one’s thoughts, practicing gratitude, and sharing one’s passions and purpose. She and others urge people to focus on what is going right and to concentrate on growth and care for themselves in multiple ways.
 - **[Practice mindfulness](#)**. Maintain moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and the surrounding environment.
 - **[Care for the mind](#)**. Take a break from social media. Take deep mindful breaths in stressful situations.
 - **[Care for the body](#)**. Engage in dance and other physical activities, make nutritional food choices, and strive for restful sleep
 - **[Care for the heart](#)**. Hug yourself. Have a good laugh or cry. Set clear boundaries. Establish manageable goals. Create an achievements folder.
 - **[Care for the soul](#)**. Ask for help and guidance from those you trust. Listen to your soul for guidance. Connect with others. Be your own best friend.
- **[Use holistic program supports](#)**. Consider the following strategies from [The Visionary Director](#):
 - Be aware and embrace challenges.
 - Understand that no one is perfect, and everyone should be trusted and treated equally.
 - Listen actively and intently by modeling patience and understanding.
 - Provide ongoing, positive communication.
 - Be an extra set of hands to support teachers and families.
 - Encourage those providing leadership to grow in leadership.

As I reflect on my own disaster experience, I learned to be transparent, stay connected, and be present. I will openly admit that there were days that felt utterly exhausting. I thought, “Why me? Why my family? Why my community?” The longing for “how it used to be” was certainly there. However, something deep within me kept a sense of hope and wanting to be strong for others. As a culmination of the Oklahoma citizens’ hope and strength, the [Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum](#) was created to store lessons learned and other resources. In the same way, the world’s current challenges require us to readily accept

and maneuver through whatever lies ahead. Program staff and families need to see early childhood leaders caring for themselves. Stay safe and healthy, and I hope that you will make mental health an ongoing (or lifelong) priority.

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