

# What you should know about the Surgeon General's advisory on parental stress

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In August 2024, the US Surgeon General acknowledged parental stress as a public health concern with the release of *Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents*.<sup>1</sup> Physician associates/assistants (PAs) should understand how this advisory affects their patients, themselves, and society, as well as what they can do to make changes.

## PARENTS ARE MORE STRESSED THAN EVER

Today's parents spend more time working and caretaking compared with past generations, resulting in unprecedented levels of parental stress. An astonishing 41% of parents (more than twice the percentage of nonparents) report being so stressed most days that they cannot function.<sup>1</sup> Stressors vary by parenting stage, from sleep disturbance in early childhood to mitigating a child's risk-taking behaviors during adolescence. Regardless of stage, the mental labor of parenting is profound, including balancing child-related schedules, needs, and decisions.

The Surgeon General's advisory identifies six key areas of parental stress: finances, time demands, children's health and safety, isolation and loneliness, technology and social media, and cultural pressures. Many of these align with social determinants of health that PAs consider for all patients, parents or not.

Chronic or excessive stress combined with environmental factors increases the risk for mental health conditions. Mental health conditions affect 24% of parents, with a disproportionate effect on marginalized groups.<sup>1</sup>



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One in eight birthing parents experience postpartum depression; nonbirthing parent psychological well-being also suffers during the perinatal period.<sup>1</sup> When tailoring care, PAs should consider their patients' family structure and additional stressors. LGBTQ-parent families may encounter discrimination or stigma; single parents may lack support or face more financial strain; and parents who are recently divorced report higher stress than other parents.

## EFFECTS ON FAMILIES AND SOCIETY

Children's well-being, including emotional and cognitive development, is influenced by parental mental health. Children of stressed parents struggling with mental health have increased rates of depression, anxiety, and developmental disorders. Maternal mental health, particularly during the perinatal period, is a strong predictor of a child's future mental health risk. Meanwhile, paternal perinatal depression is associated with aggression and destructive behaviors in children.

In children with behavioral and mental health concerns, PAs should consider parental stress and psychological well-being as contributing factors. This highlights the importance of adequately screening for and managing mental health conditions in patients who are parents to mitigate risk in children, safeguard children's well-being, and minimize long-term societal effects.

## PAs CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

PAs can play a vital role in addressing parental mental health by prioritizing preventive care and conducting mental health screenings during routine visits using evidence-based tools such as the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7). PAs should use routine wellness visits to assess parents' mental well-being, educate patients about stress management, and engage in trauma-informed care. By recognizing at-risk parents, PAs can ensure appropriate care is initiated and maintained through interprofessional collaborations between primary care and mental health care professionals. PAs should be aware of mental health care and parental support resources in the community, fostering partnerships when possible.

## PA PARENTS: TAKE HEED

PA parents must prioritize their own well-being to care for their family and patients. The Surgeon General's report provides these suggestions:

- Engage in stress-reducing activities such as exercise, sleep, and hobbies.
- Educate yourself about mental health, recognize when you need help, and embrace support when needed.
- Build connections with other parents to provide valuable emotional support.
- Ensure comprehensive health insurance coverage for your family to provide peace of mind and security for physical and mental health needs.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the guidance in the Surgeon General's report, parents will remain under pressure until there is a culture shift toward valuing the time and energy of parenting. Until then, we must advocate to expand policies and programs that support parents and caregivers, such as access to comprehensive healthcare coverage, paid parental leave, and the right to choose if and when to become a parent. **JAAPA**

## REFERENCE

1. US Department of Health and Human Services. *Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents*. [www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf](http://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf). Accessed October 23, 2024.