

Parents often struggle to balance their own needs with the overwhelming demands of caring for a child with special needs. They typically believe that they should be the one to care for their child 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and feel guilty when they do not.

Working, staying on top of the latest information, getting to many appointments every week, and just doing the day-to-day things needed for a household leaves little time for other, more enjoyable activities. Still, it is important that parents do what they can to take care of themselves and have some free/fun time on a regular basis.

Caring for a special needs child is a marathon, not a sprint.

Forgetting to have fun, get enough sleep, and do the other things you need is like running a marathon with no water—you will eventually collapse or fall apart. This will make you unavailable to help your child at all, and will add stress on your marriage and your whole family.

To avoid burnout, it is important to develop habits of stress management and self-care rather than waiting for a crisis to occur in order to stop and attend to your needs. The following are some ideas that can be incorporated into your self-care plan.

The Relaxation Response—for children and adults

The Relaxation Response is our body's reaction to following a few simple steps. This technique was defined by Herbert Benson, M.D. at Harvard Medical School based on extensive research on practices of prayer and meditation. The following is the technique taken from his book entitled *The Relaxation Response*. Try doing this for a few minutes daily and notice the changes in your thoughts, feelings, and physical state.

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face.

Keep them relaxed.

- Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing.
- As you breathe out, say the word, "ONE", silently to yourself. For example, breathe IN ...

OUT, "ONE",- IN .. OUT, "ONE", etc.

- Breathe easily and naturally. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm.

- Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation.

Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace.

- When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling upon them
- and return to repeating "ONE."

- When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes.

With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

- *Adapted from The Relaxation Response, Herbert Benson, M.D.*
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Stress Management Ideas

Parents find different ways to help themselves cope with the huge demands of caring for their child. The following are some things that have been shown to help people manage the effects of stress. You may want to use them to create a self-care plan.

Remember, this is not a test. You don't have to do everything on this list or even do any one

thing for a long time. Very few parents can find a whole hour for exercise or meditation. So, take the time you have, when you have it, and do something or just for a moment do nothing. Even a few minutes of a fun or relaxing activity or rest several times a day can make a big difference if it becomes a regular habit!

- Go to a parent support group and seek out other families of children with special needs.
- Write in a journal or free write—just write and write without worrying about what you are writing until there is nothing left.
- Learn about your child's disorder. Learning the truth can help you better understand your child and his or her needs.
- Exercise—walk around the block, jump rope as fast as you can for three minutes, stretch, whatever you enjoy.
- Practice yoga—a class is best, especially at first.
- Cuddle with a partner or, if possible, your child. Connect around something other than your child's problems.
- Look at the clouds.
- Sing along to the radio at the top of your lungs.
- Lie down, close your eyes, and imagine the most relaxing place you can think of.
- Take a nice bath or shower—just to feel good.
- Play a sport.
- Talk with someone about your child.
- Talk with someone about anything other than your child.
- Eat a favorite treat, slowly, savoring every bite.
- Make yourself laugh—watch something funny, tell a silly joke, find the humor in something, or just laugh for no reason.
- Watch a movie.
- Read a book or magazine.

It is also important to arrange for regular respite care for your child. Try not to use respite only for necessary activities but also for fun things and things that help you connect with other adults.

**Taking care of yourself does not take away from your child—
it is as much a part of your job as a parent as anything you do for your child!**