

# FACT SHEET

## SELF-CARE STRATEGIES PARENTS

Autism and Asperger's syndrome simply complicate what is already the tough job of being a parent. Parenting is similar to running a marathon; you need to pace yourself for the long term. These self-care strategies for parents can help you to look after yourself, so you can look after your child better.

### DEALING WITH STRESS

Parents with children on the autism spectrum usually experience greater stress than do parents of both children with other disabilities. They face the risk of psychological disorders, poor health and relationship breakdown and need to learn strategies for reducing the impact of stress. Parents need regular exercise, a balanced diet, regular sleep and rest and relaxation techniques. Other useful strategies include problem-solving on major issues, investigating and altering irrational beliefs, stress-reducing self-talk and meditation.

A balanced life can go a long way to reducing stress. To last the long haul, parents need to balance their needs along with those of their child, developing a lifestyle that balances caring with family, hobbies, socializing and work. Time management, goal setting and organization can help to reduce stressors, create time for enjoyable activities and maintain social support.

### RESPIRE CARE

When parenting an autistic child is very demanding, many parents find that surviving is a matter of taking time out for themselves. Respite care is an essential part of the overall support that families may need. It can be provided in the home or in a variety of out-of-home settings. Since not all families have the same needs, respite care is usually flexible to fit in with a family's requirements. It might be for a few hours, a day or longer, and you don't have to be a full time carer to access services. Make sure you have a regular schedule of breaks using respite care.

### DEALING WITH FEELINGS

Guilt, anger, resentment, fear, stress, anxiety, depression and grief can be part of the emotional journey faced by parents of a child on the autism spectrum. With time, the worst of these feelings will go. It is normal to feel as if you are going crazy at times, and it does not help to try to suppress or deny what you are feeling. There is a reason you are having them, and they will lessen when they are ready.

One common emotion that family members experience is denial. They refuse to acknowledge that things are as bad as they are. They believe that they are handling things just fine, and that everything will be back to normal soon. Although this does not represent reality, it can be a healthy, short-term way for some people to cope. In a sense, denial gives those experiencing it a "vacation" from the constant turmoil they are feeling.

Denial can be a problem, however, if the family member has unrealistic expectations about recovery. The best way to deal with your feelings is to accept them, but make sure you can talk about your feelings with someone who understands, whether it is a family member, friend, counselor or support group.

### SELF-ADVOCACY FOR PARENTS OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN

At some point, carers will find themselves unhappy with the level of support from a particular hospital, health professional, school, therapist or welfare association. You have the right to expect appropriate support or treatment, and should be assertive in claiming what you want: in effect you will need to be an advocate for your child. There are grievance procedures and appeal processes in most cases. Your autism association may be able to assist, or link you with advocacy organizations.

### BE EASY ON YOURSELF

Avoid the superhero attitude! You may try to be the model parent, with complete patience, courage, understanding, support and sacrifice. Be prepared for times when you feel like



quitting, yanking, leaving and breaking down. The parenting role is similar to running a marathon – you need to pace yourself for the long haul. Trying too hard in the early stages may mean you lose all your energy further down the track when your parenting skills may be needed even more.

### **AUTISM SUPPORT GROUPS FOR PARENTS**

Why join a support group? You can meet others in a similar position, have a break, get information and get support from others who know what your situation is like. Sharing ideas, feelings, worries, information and problems can help you feel less isolated. Sometimes family and friends won't understand the difficulties of parenting a child with autism. People in the support group will understand exactly what you are going through.

Support groups bring together carers in local areas, sometimes under the guidance of a facilitator who is experienced in supporting carers. Often other carers or workers are invited to present information and training. Your autism association can help put you in touch with carer support groups in your area. If there are none, you can always start a support group.

### **COUNSELING**

Counseling involves talking to someone who understands and can work with you to give you the encouragement, support and ideas to improve your situation. It can be a way to assist with the many changes in your relationships and roles, as well as dealing with the strong feelings associated with parenting. Your local autism association can put you in touch with support groups or organizations, who can provide counseling.

### **PLANNING FOR HEALTH**

Regular exercise, rest and nutritious food are all necessary in order to withstand stress. Try to plan your day so you get all three. Walking, swimming, yoga, gardening or dancing are good ways to get some gentle exercise. Learn to relax by listening to pleasant music, meditating or doing specific relaxation exercises can help you sleep better. Try new vegetables or fruit, eating at regular times and looking for new recipes are good ways of making eating well easier. Make sure you laugh regularly, even if you need to get out your favorite comedies on DVD.

### **PLANNING TO KEEP FRIENDS & OUTSIDE INTERESTS**

Try to relax and enjoy yourself. Maintain an identity of your own separate from that of being a parent. Keep your links to the world outside issues revolving around autism or Aspergers syndrome. Absorbing interests, having fun and relaxation are all good for your physical and mental health.

Be aware that some friends may tire of you talking about the hassles of parenting an autistic child. You may become resentful and lose friends by expecting them to provide more support than they are willing to give. Try to be understanding in these situations - you may be best sharing your ordeal with other parents of autistic children who know what you are going through.

Don't expect too much from friends. It can seem pointless talking about their everyday events when you are facing such a demanding battle, but use these opportunities to keep your friendships going and a chance to leave autism-related issues behind for a while. Remember, if the situations were reversed, you would probably not want to continually hear about the problems of a disorder you know almost nothing about. You'll need your friendships as support for the long run so try to chat about 'normal things' as you used to do.

See the Family and Carer issues section of the website for more information.

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