

Parent to Parent: Understanding Stress and Strategies for Coping

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Wouldn't it be nice to live with less stress? "Yes" is the answer, of course, but reality is different. In modern life stress is part of our daily living; we face many demands and situations like high pressure work, bad traffic, and job insecurity that can lead us to be in a constant, "stressed-out" state.

When a family has a child with disabilities, this adds a whole new range of challenges to our lives, as we struggle to adapt to new demands. These often include expanded care-taking roles and unexpected financial, social and emotional pressures that can many times seem too big to manage.

My perspective as a parent of a child with disabilities is that high levels of stress are to be expected. Having a child with disabilities opens you up to a wide range of new responsibilities and feelings you did not anticipate: dealing with the diagnosis, the grieving process (such as the parents' isolation, and feelings of loss, embarrassment, and protectiveness), the monetary costs (maybe one parent has to leave their job to care for the child), all of which put strains on the marriage, siblings and extended family.

Along the way there are new challenges that come with every stage of your child's development, that is, the often huge health and educational issues from early intervention to their transition to adult life. On top of that, there may be other important areas in your life

Parents' Responses to Survey

Parent #1:

Can you describe stress in relation to your child with disabilities?

"My life was very stressful when my son was younger, because it was a lot of work, I had to think for him and for me and in relation to getting him ready for school, meeting all his needs. Being afraid of any phone calls from school, because there was always something wrong with him. I was always in a rush."

When do you know it is too much stress?

"When I lose my patience, and I cry easily."

How do you cope with stress?

"Exercising and watching good movies."

beyond your role as a parent which you need to manage. All this can take a heavy toll on your emotional state and on your ability to think clearly.

Some stress is not so bad, because it helps us to function under pressure: it motivates us to do our best. Stress is a normal response to a threat or danger; it is the body's way of protecting us. So when it is working properly, it keeps us focused and alert.

But, beyond a certain point, stress can start causing problems with our health, relationships, and work life. We get so used to feeling "under siege" that it starts to seem familiar and even normal, and we may not notice how much it affects our behavior. Uncontrolled stress can lead to higher levels of anger, anxiety, and depression, which can add more strain on the family and make our tasks with our child's school and care-giving team more difficult to achieve.

It is known that a family who has a child with disabilities is likely to experience many physical and emotional crises that can lead to frustrations and unstated assumptions about what we expect from others. And not just between the parents: the children in the family may share many of the same emotions that the adults feel, such as grief, anger, embarrassment, or jealousy, and have trouble talking about it.

Once I read that "It is not having a child with disability that disintegrates the family, it is the way one reacts to it and each other." It is true that the first impact of the news is devastating and confusing, with the fears of the unexpected and the unknown. But once time goes by and we learn more about how to manage and anticipate our child's and our own needs, our levels of stress and anxiety can, and will, reduce.

Parent #2:

Can you describe stress in relation to your child with disabilities?

"Feeling anxiety. Too much work. Knowing that I am the only one taking care of my child--even though I have help, I prefer to handle it myself."

When do you know there is too much stress?

"When I feel there is no way out. When I cry a lot. When I want to get away."

How do you cope with stress?

"I take a deep breath, if I can I get away for a while, I find a quiet place to think and put my head together."

It is important to learn to recognize when stress is getting out of control. Finding time to create some new ways to manage stressful situations will have a positive impact not only on your life but on the lives of others around you.

Following are some strategies* that could help lower your level of stress:

- BE INFORMED:** Learn about your child's disability and what it implies, in relation to services and supports.
- GET SUPPORT:** Seek professional help either individually or in a group. Joining a parent support group will help you feel that you are not alone.
- TAKE YOUR TIME:** Allow extra time to doctor's visits or other services so you are not rushing.
- WRITE IT DOWN:** Do not rely on your memory; write down information. You have too much on your mind to remember everything.
- CELEBRATE:** Celebrate achievements of the entire family and not only those of the child with disabilities.
- TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:** Allow time for yourself for recreation and some fun.
- KEEP BALANCE IN THE FAMILY:** Understand that not only your disabled child needs attention but so do the other children, and your spouse, too.
- COMMUNICATE:** Asking questions and sharing information and feelings will prevent others from making assumptions about you and your situation.
- PLAN AHEAD:** Identify when you are most likely to be stressed. Ask for help. Create a plan in advance.

Parent #3:

"Being a single parent puts on additional demands and challenges to what is already called normal stress, especially when my daughter gets sick or I get sick--there is no one to turn to. When I feel vulnerable or very impatient, I know I am under a lot of stress.

Through the years I've learned to balance myself. I've learned to be patient, to take deep breath, to take advantage of when she is in school. I read a good book, or I sleep as much as I can."

*Adapted from the Centers For Disease Control website: <http://www.cdc.gov/family/specialneeds/>