

Parents Are Superheroes!

Taking Care of Yourself as a Parent of a Child with Special Needs



“Please place your own oxygen mask on before helping anyone else with theirs.”

We’ve heard it time and time again, but sometimes our love and compassion for others can make it understandably difficult to listen to this crucial advice. It can be especially difficult to take a step back and to make sure that you are placing your own oxygen mask on first, when the others in question are your beloved children.

The sentiment behind this saying is simple: It is difficult to take care of others if you are not taking care of yourself. This is true for everyone. It is especially true for our superhero parents of children with autism and other special needs.

Self-care is about so much more than bubble baths and essential oils, as its reputation may tell. Self-care is about making sure that your mind, heart, and body are being replenished and recharged regularly. It is providing yourself with the sustenance, self-love, and compassion that is needed to ensure that you have the energy and space to take care of the ones that you love.

This can be so difficult for any parent to incorporate into their daily routines and responsibilities. It can be even more challenging for a parent with the added responsibilities of raising a child with special developmental needs. From navigating therapy sessions, to ensuring that appointments are attended, to meeting the demands of schooling, to keeping your child happy and healthy, it may seem impossible to incorporate self-care into your daily schedules. However, there are ways to ensure that you are giving yourself the care and love that you need and that you deserve within your already busy day-to-day schedule.

Our parents truly are superheroes, and even superheroes need to make sure that they are taking care of themselves. Here are some family-friendly tips to ensure that you are taking care of yourself which will, in turn, help you to take care of your family!

Exercise – You do not have to go to the gym for an hour every day to ensure that you are getting your blood flowing and your body moving, releasing endorphins. You can spend a few precious moments in the morning stretching, taking a walk around the block with your child (it's good for them, too!), having a 5-minute dance party in the living room, or even having a sensory garden workday with your family!

Restful Sleep – Sleep is essential in recharging and re-energizing for the day ahead. When you have a million thoughts running through your mind about the day that just ended, and about the to-do list for the following day, restful sleep can be hard to come by. It can be helpful to take a few minutes before bed to clear your mind. This can be done through guided meditations (as short as just a couple of minutes), calming breathing exercises (such as Square Breathing – breath in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, breath out for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, and repeat), or even just jotting down a list of keywords that are running through your mind!

Ask For Help – It really is okay to ask for help. Even superheroes sometimes need to reach out for a hand. Whether it be friends, family, or other parents, the people who care about you may be more willing and eager to help you out than you think! There are also lots of resources out there for parents of children with autism, including both in-person and online support groups. If nothing else, having a place to connect with others who understand some of your daily challenges can be an amazing form of help!

Talk To Yourself The Way You Would Talk To Someone That You Love – Think about the last time a close friend or loved one came to you for support – how did you respond to them? Were you harsh and critical? Were you kind and understanding? It is often an innate, human reaction to speak to those we love with warmth, patience, and compassion while we speak to ourselves with criticism and judgement. So, the next time you fall into this habit, take a moment to think about how you would support someone you love through this moment. What would you say to them? These are the loving words that you deserve to hear as well.

Be Present, Be Mindful – With so much to do each day to ensure that your children are supported, their basic needs are being met, and they are happy, being present and living in the moment can be difficult at times. However, being in the moment is so important not only to our parents' well-being, but to your entire family's well-being. It can help prevent overwhelm, encourage a moment to decompress, and strengthen family relationships. Think about putting handheld devices away for even a small activity where everyone is fully engaged with one another. Or, go around the dinner table and have everyone share something that they are grateful for. Or you can even go on a walk around the block, pointing out things that you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel as you walk! These simple activities can leave you feeling refreshed, reconnected, and in a calmer headspace to take on your next task!