

# Reducing Special Needs Parent Stress

By Dan Coulter

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A lot of parents who have kids with special needs get a free helping of stress every day. With extra nuts — and sprinkles.

If this is you, how do you start an anti-stress diet? Start small. Take a break.

Oh yeah, right. When are you going to find the time?

Most of us have heard we'd be more efficient if we'd take a break once in a while. But it's hard to convince your brain that taking some time to ease your stress will really help you get more done. Mr. Brain often stubbornly sees things in the short term. If you've got 1000 orders to process and it takes about a minute to process an order, taking a five-minute break every hour means you process fewer orders in an eight hour day and fall farther behind, right?

Nope.

I read a study a while back that showed when data-processing workers got a five-minute break every hour, they had less stress and got more work done in an eight-hour day. The benefits of the break more than made up for the time away from the computer.

Here's the really interesting part of the story: in spite of the findings, the company associated with the study did NOT start giving their data processing workers five-minute breaks each hour. Huh? The bosses couldn't bring themselves to do it. In spite of the evidence, it just seemed counterproductive.

Maybe your brain is working from the same perspective, with a side of guilt thrown in. Have you ever kept at a task way past the point of diminishing returns because you were working on behalf of your family and it seemed like you'd be short-changing them to take even a few minutes for yourself?

Part of the problem is that when you're overloaded and stress is building, that stress can affect your judgment. Stress can put you in a hole and make it hard to see a way to climb out. So you work and work and get more tired and frustrated and make mistakes — and sometimes get sick.

As I write this, I'm looking at a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) study (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html>) that says health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.

So there's a reason to relax you can relate to! You can't do as good a job taking care of your kids if you're sick — so consider being your own doctor and ordering yourself to relax a bit.

By the way, here are a few of the conditions that the NIOSH study says contribute to stress:

- heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours
- conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility, too many “hats to wear”
- lack of support or help
- rapid changes for which workers are unprepared

Doesn't that sort of sound like a job description for a parent of a special needs child?

If you're feeling stretched too thin, here are some suggestions to improve your life and get more done by taking some time for yourself:

(NOTE: If you feel like you can't manage your stress by yourself, I'd suggest you seek professional help. Try these recommendations if you're confident you can take some positive steps on your own.)

## Relaxing Tips

When you're starting a task, set an alarm or kitchen timer to go off in an hour. When it goes off, take a five-minute break. Stand up, stretch, walk outside. Do something that gets your mind off the task for a few minutes. Each time you start to work again, reset that timer so you get a few minutes every hour to recharge your batteries. (My wife gave me a desk clock that chimes on the hour to remind me to take breaks.)

If you're working long days, it's also good to take a 15 minute break every few hours.

Don't neglect lunch. Taking a half-hour or an hour off for lunch can be a real energizer in the middle of a busy day. If possible, do some socializing during lunch, either in person or on the phone.

Find some favorite songs and listen to them during your breaks. A song you like can really help get your mind off work for a few minutes. Another option is to stand up and stretch, then sit in your chair, close your eyes and take five slow, deep breaths.

If at all possible, take a daily walk. A 20 to 30 minute daily walk can help reduce your stress and help you get or stay fit. I'm a lot calmer since I started walking. Ask my wife. I look forward to it so much that I make it a priority and find ways to work it into a busy day.

When you feel yourself getting stressed to the point where you keep spinning your wheels, try shifting your brain into neutral for a while. Let things wash over you. Some decisions won't wait, but if you're upset and you can postpone a decision, it's usually a good idea to calm down first. This may save you from saying something you regret or doing something you wish you could undo. When you're spinning your wheels in frustration, a little neutral time can help you find a way to get traction that you hadn't noticed because your stress gave you a blind spot.

Get out a calendar and plan some time for yourself. Going out one night a week for a few hours can help put some balance and perspective into your life. Don't you feel and work better when you have something to look forward to? If you and your spouse can do it together, great. If not, take turns. If you're a single parent, maybe you can trade off with another single parent.

Go out with friends or see a movie by yourself — whatever you enjoy. If you can't make it every week, make it every other week. One thing is sure: you have to take the initiative and give yourself permission. Don't be apologetic. You're not goofing off. You're making an investment in a person who is crucial to your family: you.

In my experience, these pauses for relaxation can help make you more efficient, more optimistic and give you ideas you just can't get when the fatigue poisons are building up in your brain.

It may seem hard to find the time at first, but a little relaxation can make you a better mom or dad.

So you really have no choice.

Your kids deserve it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dan Coulter produces videos for people with Asperger Syndrome and similar special needs. You can find more articles on his website at: [www.coultervideo.com](http://www.coultervideo.com)