

Caring for the Caregiver

Changing the course of the life of your child with autism can be a very rewarding experience. You are making an enormous difference in his or her life. To make it happen, you need to take care of yourself. Take a moment to answer these questions: *Where does your support and strength come from? How are you really doing? Do you need to cry? Complain? Scream? Would you like some help but don't know who to ask?*

Remember that if you want to take the best possible care of your child, you must first take the best possible care of yourself.

Parents often fail to evaluate their own sources of strength, coping skills or emotional attitudes. You may be so busy meeting the needs of your child that you don't allow yourself time to relax, cry or simply think. You may wait until you are so exhausted or stressed out that you can barely carry on before you consider your own needs. Reaching this point is not helping you or your family. You may feel that your child needs you right now, more than ever. Your "to do" list may be what is driving you forward right now. You may feel completely overwhelmed and not know where to start. There is no single way to cope. Each family is unique and deals with stressful situations differently. Getting your child started in treatment will help you feel better. Acknowledging the emotional impact of autism and taking care of yourself during this stressful period will help prepare you for the challenges ahead. Autism is a pervasive, multi-faceted disorder. It will not only change the way that you look at your child, it will change the way you look at the world. Maintaining open and honest communication with your partner and family as well as discussing your fears and concerns will help you to deal with the many changes in your life. As some parents may tell you, you may be a better person for it. The love and hope that you have for your child make you stronger than you realize.

Here are some tips from parents who have experienced what you are going through:

Get going.

Getting your child started in treatment will help. There are many details you will be managing in an intensive treatment program, especially if it is based in your home. If you know your child is engaged in meaningful activities, you will be more able to focus on moving forward. It may also free up some of your time so you can educate yourself, advocate for your child and take care of yourself.

Ask for help.

Asking for help can be very difficult, especially at first. Don't hesitate to use whatever support is available to you. People around you may want to help, but may not know how. Is there someone who can take your other kids somewhere for an afternoon? Or cook dinner for your family one night so that you can spend the time learning? Can someone pick a few things up for you at the store or do a load of laundry? Or let other people know you are going through a difficult time and could use a hand?

Talk to someone.

Everyone needs someone to talk to. Let someone know what you are going through and how you feel. Someone who just listens can be a great source of strength. If you can't get out of the house, use the phone to call a friend.

Consider joining a support group.

It may be helpful to listen or talk to people who have been or are going through a similar experience. Support groups can be great sources of information about what services are available in your area and who provides them. You may have to try more than one to find a group that feels right to you. You may find you aren't a "support group kind of person." For many parents in your situation, support groups provide valuable hope, comfort and encouragement.