

PFA Tips

Take Care of YOU

2020 is finally over. Really. Seriously. Even if this past year brought additional stress to our lives, as caregivers we experienced stress before 2020 and we will continue to deal with stress well into 2021 and beyond. A 2019 study of 395 parents showed that about 19% of the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) had symptoms of PTSD. While one might quickly conclude the source of parents' stress is their children's behavior, the truth is that other factors, such as lack of support and services, also play a role. Regardless the cause, we cannot provide the best care if we ourselves can't breathe.

Connect with other parents

Sometimes just knowing you aren't alone in your experiences can offer a bit of relief. Talk to parents who have fought the battles you are engaged in, cried for the same causes, found help and solutions, and have discovered joy in the smallest of steps. Look for opportunities to walk the paths of those that came before you. Don't re-create the wheel. I'm sure I'm missing a few cliches, but you understand where I'm going with this. Visit our online provider directory and choose the category "Support Groups" to connect with families in your area. Also, autism Facebook groups offer connections without geographic barriers. (If you need help identifying support or Facebook groups, contact us.)

Ask for help

Practice this with me. "Can you please help me?" "May I ask a favor of you?" Stand in front of a mirror and practice saying it over and over. Ask a neighbor, a friend, a family member, someone from a local support group, a teacher, or one of your neurotypical teenagers who wrongly believes they are exempt from all home and family responsibilities. (Disclosure: I have teenage children. Send help.)

Explore respite care

Take a break and go do something you enjoy. Respite care is short term relief to give caregivers a break. If no one is available from the list above, it might be time to explore respite care providers.

Visit our online provider directory and choose the category "Respite Care". Funding for respite services may be available through LISS funds, the Autism Waiver, DDA waivers or some county departments of social services. Also check the category "Grants and Funding Sources" in our provider directory.

Soak it all in

As children, baths were something we were forced to take. We couldn't have imagined that time soaking in a tub would ever be considered a luxury. But just 12-20 minutes of soaking in Epsom salt can be therapeutic to relieve tense muscles and create a calming sense in the body. Pair that with a Bluetooth speaker or wireless headphones to drown out the sound of your kids banging on the bathroom door.

Work it girl

You too dads. Run, walk, lift, swim – just MOVE. Exercise triggers the release of endorphins, a chemical in the brain that stimulates relaxation and a positive feeling. You don't need to be a gym rat – a 30-minute walk will create that release. And if you can walk with a friend, even better.

Eat an entire pack of Oreos

I'm kidding. As tempting as that might be, and as satisfying as it may feel those moments you are feeding your munchies, you'll feel horrible later. Trust me. I know. Without turning this into a Human



Physiology lecture, healthy foods can help improve your mood, while a diet high in added sugar and processed foods may increase depression.

Sleep

This time I'm not kidding. Nothing else on this list matters if you aren't getting any sleep. Do whatever it takes to ensure you experience sleep every day. Talk to your doctor, hit the bed whenever your child sleeps, sneak in the ever elusive power nap, turn off your camera or use a lifelike photo to snooze during a Zoom meeting... (wait, what???)

See your doctor

This year of COVID-19 has really brought the importance of preventative care and keeping yourself healthy into the forefront. Get your routine exams and those age recommended tests none of us want. Remember, it takes less time to get a routine medical test than it is to get treatment for something that was ignored.

continued on back



Focus on this moment. Right now.

I need to make sure my son is logged in for class, drive my daughter to work, attend three work meetings today, check in on two sick friends, pick up the four items I forgot to get at the grocery store yesterday, figure out why my wifi keeps cutting out,..... Does this sound familiar? It's what I call classic "squirrel syndrome" – where my brain just races from thought to thought of the day's tasks. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program**, defines **Mindfulness** as *the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally*. Visit <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/> for a guide to practice mindfulness.

A simple Mindfulness exercise is called the Five Senses Exercise. Calm your mind by focusing on what you are experiencing right now through any or all of your five senses: sound, sight, touch, taste, and smell (rather than your thoughts).

- **What 5 things can you see?**
Notice things around you: a picture on the wall, a tree, a person walking by, a shiny reflection.
- **What 4 things can you feel?**
Notice what you currently feel: a sleeve against your arm, glasses on your face, a gentle breeze on your skin, your feet on the floor.

- **What 3 things can you hear?**
Notice the sounds around you: a bird chirping, background music, the hum of a computer fan, sirens in the distance.
- **What 2 things can you smell?**
Notice the smells around you, whether refreshing or unpleasant: flowers, coffee, food cooking, trash.
- **What 1 thing can you taste?**
Take a sip of coffee, pop a mint into your mouth, bite into a snack, stick out your tongue and taste the air.

Be for real

Be realistic about your to-do lists. If your goal is to over-accomplish, you will feel overwhelmed and end up accomplishing little. Set limits. And while we're on the subject, say "no" when it's perfectly reasonable to not accept another task request.

Don't buy tickets for a guilt trip destination

We're supposed to be taking care of everyone, all the time. But are we? And who besides us (and our teenage children) says so? It's ok to claim 20-30 minutes of the day as your own. It's healthy. And it models healthy behavior for our kids.

Additional Resources

PFA Online Provider Directory
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

1-Minute Mindfulness Exercises
<https://psychcentral.com/blog/1-minute-mindfulness-exercises/>

5 Fun Mindfulness Activities for Children
<https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/5-fun-mindfulness-activities-children-breathing-exercises>

LISS Funding
<https://dda.health.maryland.gov/Pages/liss.aspx>

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