

INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

If you have a child with a disability and have been struggling to find some 'me' time lately, this podcast is for you.

Paul Mavromatis identifies some strategies shared by members of parent groups about how they find time to meet their own needs. He'll also discuss the implications of not giving yourself a break and explores the many benefits that come when you do.

PARENTS' THOUGHTS...

'I have vague recollections of a time when there was a me who had a varied life.'

'I often wonder how my health will be affected in the longer term if I don't meet my own needs.'

'I just can't find the time to meet some of my needs.'

'I just feel angry and frustrated that there never seems to be any space.'

'I'm just too plain exhausted to even put any energy into thinking about my own needs.'

'I feel guilty about even thinking that I should have any needs.'

If you've had any of these thoughts recently, then it's highly likely that you need to make some 'me' space for yourself. As you know, there are many demands on parents and depending on the intensity of support required by your child, this can become all consuming.

The drive to support the child becomes the singular focus for many parents. Their own hopes, dreams and emotions can become buried as a result.

One important way of dealing with these demands in a positive and effective way is to ensure that you create sufficient space in your week to take care of yourself.

If you don't, ultimately, you're not only risking feeling chronically frustrated but you also face the possibility of having chronic health problems.

THE IMPACT OF HAVING A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY

Our physiological make up is designed to avoid or respond and deal with stressful situations, to help us move through the phase and return our bodies and minds to a more peaceful state.

Chronic, ongoing, long term stress that makes it difficult for us to move through the stress phase can have not only negative but devastating impacts on our psychological and physical health.

Being a parent of a child with disability has been identified by various studies as being one such chronically stressful situation.

So, what are the potential negative impacts?

The impact on your health is the major one. These can include migraine headaches, high blood pressure and mild to moderate depression. Chronic stress can also lead to even more serious consequences such as strokes, cardiovascular disease, chronic physical pain, severe depression and anxiety.

Health difficulties like these debilitate us as individuals, reduce our joy of life and sap our energy. More importantly, if you are a parent of a child with a disability, it may result in a lessening of the quality of care you provide.

We aren't superheroes, we're humans and humans need breaks in order to function at an optimum level.

Studies of work environments where staff were expected to work much longer hours than are accepted in the general community, have found the incidences of mistakes increased and efficiency and work output decreased.

After periods of rest, the same individuals made fewer mistakes and their work output increased.

Giving yourself regular breaks will help you to feel refreshed and more effective in the support that you provide to your child.

THE BENEFITS OF 'ME' SPACE

Creating me time and space will enable you to:

- Relieve stress and all of its negative health implications
- Think creatively about pressures. This will enable you to perhaps plan a different course of action
- Do something different from the grinding routine that we all experience
- Maintain other important relationships from which we derive social joy such as with friends, relatives, our other children, partners, etc
- Feel like your batteries have been recharged so you are better disposed to continue your caring responsibilities
- Do something for yourself that you really enjoy and derive much pleasure from.

A break helps us remember that there is a 'me' and it's ok for me to have a little fun also.

There are a range of things that you can do which help give you a break and most people know what they enjoy and what relaxes them.

However some parents express barriers in making space for themselves. Feelings of guilt and anger, wanting the best for the child, unrealistic self or family expectations, comparing their child's progress to others and just sheer exhaustion often block parents from considering their own needs.

Let's hear what some parents have said about how they negotiate these barriers:

'I ignore the dust and I now do the housework every second or third week and I use the time saved to do something pleasurable for myself.'

'My husband and I were reluctant about using respite services or even family looking after our son. We knew that no one looked after him as well as we do. However, we have pushed past that and feel like new people when we have a break.'

'I make sure I do most of my jobs like shopping, cleaning etc, while my son is around and use the time he is at school as me time or running my business from home'

'Our family has a policy that everyone gets a turn at their own space. We also make sure we have regular special times for our other kids as it seems so easy to forget about them in all this'

'I made an agreement with my wife that helps us both. When I come home from work I go straight into our bedroom where I listen to the music that I love for about 45 mins – then I go out feeling refreshed to be with my kids. My wife has a night out with her girlfriends each week while I look after the kids.'

'Not many offers came from friends or relatives to look after our child when we felt desperate for a break. We made contact with a small group of other parents who have a child with a disability and we all take it in turns to look after each other's kids when it's needed. Our child has a good time playing with other kids and we know that the parents are able to understand and be comfortable with our kid's needs.'

'If our daughter goes on anything like a school or holiday camp we jump at the opportunity and go for a holiday somewhere. Once we flew to the Gold Coast for four days. We had an absolute ball'.

'We don't have much money to go out very often but my mother is absolutely there if I need her. My husband and I met through a bushwalking club and we love to just get out and go for a few hours walk in a national park.'

'Once a month I shout myself to a massage and facial. I get some of that knotted tension out of my body and feel like a new woman.'

Those examples from parents identify changes in approach and thinking that they have had to make. Quite a bit of planning and negotiation has had to go into the arrangements. But I also get a sense that the rewards for the individuals concerned have been most positive.

Anything that engages you socially, mentally through such things as hobbies, physically through exercise or fun physical activity and emotionally through our relationships with loved ones and friends all have positive outcomes in relieving stress and providing a much-needed break.

CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's website - www.cpfoundation.com.au