

Taking Care of ME?

By Laurie Smith, Support Services Manager at Parent to Parent of Georgia

In the P2P Supporting Parent training we encourage parents to pause and take care of themselves. “Taking care of me” sounds good, yet so many parents struggle with this. Why is this easier said than done? To learn more, Parent to Parent of Georgia conducted a survey of our parent volunteers a few years ago. The biggest obstacles faced were time and money, followed by childcare. No big surprise. What I did find surprising was one common response came up in ALL of the questions - guilt. One parent said “doing something for me will mean taking away from my child...” Almost all parents of children with disabilities experience this kind of guilt and are tempted to regularly sacrifice their own needs to make the needs of their child a priority. Are you surprised or does this sound familiar? So, what can we do about this? On an intellectual level, we know that when we take care of ourselves, we will be better able to care for our families. Perhaps we need help internalizing this truth. Personally, knowing this on an intellectual level doesn’t always override my guilt. I’m not sure how to get over this but I think the first step is to focus on the potential consequences - for me and my family. Did you know parents of children with disabilities are more likely to experience burnout over major life events such as divorce, surgeries and relocations? These situations impact the whole family.

For those who are practicing self-care on a regular basis, I applaud you! Furthermore, I appreciate having you as role models so I can improve my own behavior. Some of you may be like me and need a little help getting started. Based on well-researched articles, the key seems to be starting with baby steps. Baby steps will help us get comfortable leaving our families for a short period of time. After a few steps, we can see that we are happier and rejuvenated to some degree. Our spouses and children will come to learn that “self-care time” is not only good for you; it’s good for everyone in the house.

So, what are some ways to get started? To answer this, P2P sent out a survey asking parents of children with disabilities, “How do you take care of your mind, body and soul?” The results were clearly aligned with these categories of basic needs: **physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual.**

For our **physical** needs, many responded with getting exercise - for some this is walking and for others it is taking classes like kickboxing or Pilates. According to one Supporting Parent, “I find that if I schedule exercise at the same time every day, I am more likely to keep the routine. Sometimes it is overwhelming to do everything that you need to do to be healthy, but if you try and do one thing consistently it will give you more self confidence. Walking is the thing for me!” For others, it’s pampering themselves with manicures and/or pedicures on a regular basis. Don’t forget healthy eating and keeping up with your own medical and dental care.

Emotional needs include security, trust and intimacy. Who doesn’t enjoy the opportunity to give and receive love? Some of us meet this need by going on dates or simply spending time with our spouse, spending one-on-one time with each child, lunches or dinners with a friend, sending a quick text or making a phone call.

Don’t forget that being matched with other Supporting Parents is for everyone—including our volunteers! Remember, parents providing 1 on 1 emotional support to other parents is the reason we were founded over 30 years ago! It is so easy for parents of children with disabilities to become **socially** isolated. To prevent this from happening, some participate in book clubs, take weekends away with friends, or attend church retreats. Attending support groups can also give us the opportunity to be with other parents who can relate to our experience, provide networks for sharing ideas, resources and more. P2P can put you in

touch with support groups and respite providers so you can meet your social needs. Some of our Navigator Teams host social events. Give us a call and we'll help you get connected to a Navigator Team near you.

All of us need some form of **intellectual** stimulation to keep us sane. One Supporting Parent said, "I see books as a way to escape and 'see the world' and this is good for my mind, reduces stress and more." Another parent said, "When I get stressed out I watch someone else (on the Food Network) create something beautiful and delicious for a family." Learning a new recipe or hobby, taking a class of personal interest, watching an interesting TV program, or attending free P2P trainings can also help us meet our intellectual needs.

We all share a need to feel that our lives have meaning and to believe in higher power. Meeting one's **spirituality** needs is not limited to participating in an organized religion. It's more about the pursuit of a meaningful life. Some parents do this by meditating, attending church, synagogue or temple, participating in Bible study, reading scripture, or praying.

We are fortunate to have so many parents finding purpose through volunteering with P2P. Thank you so much for volunteering your time and talents through our Supporting Parent and/or Navigator Programs!