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Providing Hope and Help for Autism Families

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The Autism War

*Lou Conte speaks out on
his powerful new book*



Cannabis Controversy

Can marijuana help our kids with autism?

SUMMERTIME STRESS-BUSTERS



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summer was sacred. The weather was warm, time was irrelevant, and homework non-existent. It was all so exciting, and full of possibility.

Fast-forward a few decades, and summer is much different. Sure, it's still warm outside and the general pace of life feels a bit more leisurely, even if you are stuck behind a desk in an office cubicle. But as a parent, your mind is never totally at ease, in any season. Life sometimes feels like a perpetual calm before the storm. It is a disquieting feeling, but one to which we adjust in order to exist in a world separate from our children.

BATTLING DEPRESSION

Yet parents of children on the autism spectrum are rarely able to detach from their kids, at least not for very long. As hordes of mainstream youngsters head off to their prescribed summertime activity, special needs kids often stay put. What's more, with school on hiatus, caretakers accustomed to a few hours relief each day are temporarily charged with fulltime care. The struggle becomes not only how to entertain their charges, but how to maintain peace of mind.

Taking care of children on the autism spectrum requires a special kind of energy, physically, psychologically, and I think, most important, physiologically. Not surprisingly, studies have shown that those who mind special needs kids are particularly prone to negative emotions. Earlier this year, researchers at the University of Illinois found that mothers of young children with autism spectrum disorders experience significantly higher levels of depression symptoms and stress than mothers of typically developing children.

When a child is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, the family's focus swiftly shifts toward managing every aspect of that child's well-being. With so much attention being given to ASD kids, other health problems seem secondary, even if they're not. But stress,

With school in recess, use these strategies to combat the added stress of going back into fulltime care mode...

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

As a kid, summer is everything. Just the word evokes a sense of nostalgia in most of us: carefree days and nights spent on the beach, chasing lightening bugs in the

yard, licking melted ice cream off sticky fingers. Maybe you attended summer camp, played on a traveling sports team, or goofed off with friends at the neighborhood pool. No matter the activity,

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commonly found in cleaning agents with non-toxic plant-based ingredients. Deirdre has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her impact as a leader in the field of environmental health. ◀

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STRESS AND DISEASE

Not all stress is bad, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. In some instances, stress is an automatic, life-saving response that prepares animals to face a threat or flee to safety. The functions of survival—quick pulse, fast breath, tense muscles—kick in, and sometimes the immune system even gets a little boost.

Chronic stress, however, affects the body quite differently. Immunity is lowered, and digestive, excretory, and reproductive systems stop working normally. Stress has also been linked to cancer, heart disease, and asthma flare-ups. These symptoms may occur together, separately, in different combinations, or not at all.

Stress presents differently in each of us, and it's important to consider your own body's indications. Are you running to the bathroom more than usual? Have you lost your appetite, or are you overeating? Do you find yourself *constantly* battling a cold? Chances are your body is physically manifesting the stress in your life, whether from work, family obligations, or caring for a special needs child.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GREEN SPACES

The demands of everyday life rarely recede, especially if you have a child on the autism spectrum. It requires being not only of sound body, but also of sound mind. As it happens, one of the best methods for battling stress benefits the body, too, and presents an opportunity to leave your air-conditioned cocoon this summer and participate in activities with children of any disposition.

Numerous studies have pointed to exercise as a stress reducer and mood

enhancer. Along those lines, spending time in green spaces has been linked to significant and sustained improvements in mental health. Even if you're not feeling particularly stressed out at any given moment, odds are you'll feel even better after a trip to the park, or even to your own backyard.

It is difficult enough to motivate yourself to exercise, and downright impossible to convince a child on the autism spectrum to abandon his or her preferred activity to do something else. The website "Play Through Autism" suggests teaching ASD kids new exercises in a familiar setting, like their own backyard, so as not to overwhelm them with equipment, noise, or other people at a playground. Practice first in their room so they're more comfortable once outside, and try structuring the workout so that difficult exercises (like squats) are followed by easier ones (bean bag tosses).

As with anything, consistency is key. Create a workout schedule (and follow it!) so that everyone in the house knows when and where you'll be exercising each day—even if it just means a walk around the block. Before you know it, your routine-loving special needs child will be the one dragging *you* out the door!

THE GUT-BRAIN CONNECTION

Because diet and exercise go hand-in-hand, it's not surprising that what you eat and drink also impacts your state of mind. *Psychology Today* notes that even small amounts of caffeine have been associated with anxiety, panic attacks, and increased feelings of nervousness and irritability. Similarly, the dehydrating effects of alcohol may increase anxiety, even though it is commonly consumed to help people relax.

Research has also linked gut bacteria to brain health, which should come as no surprise to parents of children on the autism spectrum. Studies in mice have shown that changing their gut bacteria made bold mice more

timid, and aggressive mice calmer. Additionally, mice with autism-like behaviors showed demonstrable improvement after consuming probiotics to ameliorate their gut health. As I've explained previously, probiotic supplements have numerous health benefits, and fermented foods like miso, sauerkraut, kimchi (a Korean cabbage), and the increasingly popular strained Greek yogurt are all probiotic powerhouses. If you can't get your family to eat these foods, probiotic supplements are a great option too.

Other foods may also keep stress at bay, according to "The Calm Clinic", a website devoted to helping people overcome anxiety. Whole grains are rich in tryptophan, which becomes serotonin, a calming neurotransmitter. The antioxidants in blueberries may help relieve stress, and zinc-rich almonds are key for maintaining a balanced mood.

Children on the autism spectrum are no strangers to stress either. Studies have shown that children, adolescents, and adults on the autism spectrum are all prone to anxiety, which can implicate their health in myriad ways. Whether anxiety fuels symptoms of autism or the other way around, providing your child with the healthiest possible lifestyle certainly can't hurt.

Taking care of a child on the autism spectrum, while also taking care of yourself, is a huge and overwhelming responsibility; it's perfectly normal to feel at your wit's end all year round. The best gift to give your special needs child is a parent of sound mind, who feels capable, strong, and in control, even if you're not. After all, isn't that the secret of all parenting? ◀

Note: Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health condition. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.



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