

A couple years ago, I attended an autism conference at which a researcher, who had been provided actual money to pursue this line of work, shared her startling results with the few hundred parents of children with autism in the audience (please, in the interests of safety, do not continue reading if you are standing up, holding a baby, or operating a vehicle). The researcher dropped this bombshell on us: Parenting a child with autism is stressful.

You can imagine the pandemonium that ensued. What? What was she saying? How could this be so? Stressed? Us? Well, as it turns out, parenting a child with autism is more stressful than parenting a child without autism.

Had the researcher gone on to say, “and because of our findings, the following programmes have been put into place to support these parents in exactly the ways that they said they’d like to be supported” my blood pressure would have normalized. That didn’t happen. Instead, I went to get a pastry in an effort to prevent my head from exploding.

Given that parents of children with autism often receive very little effectual support from those best in a position to do so, our newsletter received a request to look into this topic. Over the next few newsletters, I will discuss how parents can cope with the stress in their lives.

According to what I’ve gleaned from my own research, there are generally three ways to deal with stress, commonly used in combination, depending on your situation and the type of person you are:

1. Task-oriented strategy: meaning you analyze the situation, make a plan to change it, and then implement that plan.
2. Emotion-oriented strategy: meaning you find a way to share your feelings with social supports.
3. Distraction-oriented strategy: meaning you find ways to take your mind off and temporarily leave the stress in your life behind.

I would also add a fourth, very important but often overlooked, approach:

4. Physical/biomedical-oriented strategy: meaning that you support your own body’s chemistry to help cope with the physical component of stress response

From my experiences with the many parents I know who are treating autism, most have already made great strides in the first strategy, becoming task oriented. Most parents search the internet, buy books, find a practitioner, keep a diary, change the diet, begin supplementing, run tests, and accomplish the many hundreds of tasks required to help their child.

Researching, prioritizing, and implementing these tasks are crucial to treating autism and ultimately, and hopefully, reducing the stress until it becomes just the everyday “normal” stress that all parents cope with. However, treating autism is often a very long journey, which is why most parents must look to strategies two, three and four as well. This series will focus on some ideas involving these final three coping strategies.

When it comes to an emotion-oriented strategy, I don't think my experience is unique: often, it is not easy to talk to other parents who are not in the same position as you. Let's face it, no matter how much your aunt or neighbor might love you or your child, she likely won't be interested in talking poo or may not fully comprehend what a "bad night" might truly mean.

Treating Autism has organized more than a dozen local support groups around the UK so that parents can find emotional and social support physically close to them. Group meetings can look like many things—dinner at a pub, cooking lessons, watching a video and sharing stories—but the common goal is to give parents a chance to meet people who are walking the same path. Amidst all the stress, it may seem like more effort than it is worth to attend a meeting, but in my experience nothing could be further from the truth.

Please contact Jane, *Treating Autism*'s local groups coordinator, to find out if a support group is already up and running near you (use the Contact Us button at www.TreatingAutism.co.uk). If one isn't, perhaps you'd be interested in starting one. Jane has developed a local group starter package to support people in their efforts to begin a group—we don't want to add more stress to your life so we've done some of the work for you. There are dozens and dozens of parents like you ready to share a few hours together and make this journey a bit easier. Please do join us.

One of the very best distraction-oriented strategies is laughter. It is nearly impossible to dwell on the stress in our lives in the middle of a good belly laugh. Furthermore, it's been proven that laughter reduces stress hormone levels. In other words, laughter not only acts as a distraction, it also acts as a physical strategy to address stress. Studies have shown that people in ongoing stressful situations, even if they don't believe themselves to be very stressed, often have cortisol (a stress hormone) levels more than 250% above the norm. You can read a good article about laughter and its benefits here: <http://stress.about.com/od/stresshealth/a/laughter.htm>

One of the cheapest and most convenient ways to laugh is by using <http://www.youtube.com/>. I rarely have time to watch a movie or even a television show, but most days will allow me to download and watch a five or 10 minute clip by some very funny people. One of my current favourites features two well-known British actors: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqTcK96vFg> If you like cute bald babies, you'll laugh at this one: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBlgSz8sSM>

Using youtube, if you've not already, is simple. Just put terms into the search function that you think might lead to something that will give you a good laugh. Maybe the name of your favourite comedian or comedy show, or something as simple as "funniest video".

In my opinion, it is crucial to use a physical/biomedical strategy for addressing stress. In fact, it is important to use a number of them. Sadly, eating pastries is not a good physical/biomedical strategy for coping with stress, however much I wish it were true. There are many physical and biomedical strategies that one can use—learning a bit about the physical aspect of our stress response can help you make a good decision about which strategy to choose.

Stress response in our body is controlled by the adrenal glands. These two small glands, one sitting above each of our kidneys, aren't talked about often but play a huge role in good health. A person with too many significant stressors in his or her life can overwork these glands. The result can be adrenal fatigue.

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Adrenal fatigue is much more common than people generally believe and the consequences can be significant and debilitating. According to Dr. James L. Wilson, author of [Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome](#), the hormones secreted by the adrenal glands control or heavily influence how our body uses carbohydrates and fats, how we convert fat and protein to energy, how we store fat, blood sugar levels, and proper cardiovascular and gastrointestinal function. Properly functioning adrenal glands also secrete hormones that reduce inflammation, oxidative stress, and allergic reactions. As stated by Dr. Wilson, “Your resiliency, energy, endurance and your very life all depend on their proper functioning.”

How to support the adrenal glands is a huge topic, much too big for the scope of this newsletter. Please, however, do check the Useful Documents section of our website www.TreatingAutism.co.uk in the very near future as I will soon be placing a document there that talks about recognizing and reversing adrenal fatigue. The vast majority of people, even if they are not suffering from adrenal fatigue, can benefit from the knowledge, especially if it can mean avoiding adrenal fatigue in the future.

It is very important to realize that as much as parents of ASD children might be experiencing enormous stress, the same is often true of children. Each of the stress coping strategies shared here for adults can and should be considered for children with ASD and their siblings as well. We will continue to look at this very important topic of how to deal with the stress in our lives in the February newsletter.

Treating Autism