

Parents need to take time for themselves

Your boss wants that proposal by Monday. A letter from the IRS arrives. Maybe it's a refund? Nope, you're getting audited. This morning your windshield cracks by a stray rock on the way to run errands at the grocery store, the dry cleaner, and the pharmacy. You have a teething baby keep-

PARENTS CORNER

ing you up at night, a three year old whose favorite phrase is, "No I won't," and a moody pre-teen who no longer wants to be seen with her parents in public. Just a typical day in the paradise

known as parenthood. How do you keep a family running effectively and take care of yourself at the same time? With an endless list of things to be done, it seems noble and loving to set aside your needs for the sake of the family. Over time what this creates is one stressed-out human being. Sometimes

personal interests must be put aside for the sake of the family. Diapers need changing, bills need paying, lawns need mowing. However, if you put yourself on hold long enough, the side effects can be disastrous to you and your family.

Bad stress

Parents under stress are less emotionally available to their kids, less capable of coping constructively with problems, and choose more destructive behavior toward family members. If you're feeling like there is not enough time in a day to do everything, that means to be done and certainly no time left for you, consider that every human being who has ever lived has had 24 hours in a day. No one has more hours and no one has less. What kind of choices are you making to fill your 24 hours?

Here is a simple method to transform your hectic days to include some de-stressing activities. Write it down. Write down a list of 25 fun things you enjoy doing. Don't think long or hard about them, just start writing down anything that comes into your head. No matter how silly they might seem, force yourself to come up with all 25. Committing activities to paper helps create them in your life. Post your list on the refrigerator. Share your list with others. Others who are aware of your list are likely to help you make them happen. You may find that listening to music on your list, but you never take the time to pull out your CDs.

Block of time

Maybe you'd like 20 minutes of time alone after dinner, or a morning jog. By creating this list, you get back in touch with yourself. You begin making more conscious choices about your time. Be sure to schedule some of these activities in your day. Have you ever found yourself with a small unexpected block of time - time that you could take for yourself, but since nothing was planned, you use that time up in less-than-satisfying ways?

Next time, look at your list. Is there any activity listed that you can do right now? Maybe read a magazine, visit with a neighbor, put on some music and dance with your kids. Be sure to incorporate your list onto your monthly calendar. Each month can include items from your list. Making this conscious effort is like vaccinating yourself against stress.

Get the support of other people. When times are stressful, let people help you. Let family members or trusted sitters watch the kids so you can go out with your spouse.

Hire someone to paint, clean or maintain the house. Be creative here and you'll quickly replenish your energy. One woman found the hour before dinner to be so stressful that she hired a college culinary arts student from the local community college to prepare and deliver dinner for her family five nights a week. Don't quickly discount this idea as a wasteful expense. Stress takes a toll both mentally and physically. The price of weekly lawn mowing is small compared to the price of stress-related medical expenses.

If money is just too tight, consider trading services. Many neighborhoods form baby-sitting co-ops where a group of families get together and trade baby-sitting. If you like to cook and your friend likes to iron, trade services. Your children can lend support, too. Children who do regular chores are better students.

Look for support groups. Many communities offer weekly parenting classes, church groups, book clubs, stress management courses and other group resources. This support can be a life saver, especially when your children are very young. Networking with other parents helps you see that you are not alone. Hearing how others handle stressful life events can be an empowering experience.

Allow yourself to address your stress. First, notice what recurring events stress you out. Next,



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look for solutions. Nancy feels stressed in the mornings before her daughter, Linda, leaves for school. They argue about what Linda will wear. They struggle to find matching socks. Lunch needs to be packed and Linda can never remember where she left her shoes. Mornings are just too rushed and highly stressful. Once the source of stress was addressed, they were able to find solutions that worked for both of them.

They decided to pick out clothes the night before school. Linda would make her own lunch in the morning, and they placed a box by the back door for her school shoes.

Family benefits

It's not selfish to take care of yourself. It benefits the whole family. Parents stop themselves from going to the theater, sunbathing in the tub, or spending time with a loved hobby by thinking of all the things they "should" do. "I should do the laundry, read to the kids, answer my e-mail, or paint the fence."

The next time guilty feelings stop you, just consider this: After you allow yourself to go play golf, take a walk or get a massage, how do you treat your family? Pretty darn good, I'll bet. Taking care of yourself gives your family back the sparkling, enthusiastic parent who was hidden under all that stress.

Most people take better care of their cars than themselves. You can always buy a new car. You are much harder to replace.

Marilyn Suttle brings skill-building workshops to corporate and educational settings. E-mail her at MsSuttle@aol.com or visit her Web site: <http://member.aol.com/MsSuttle>

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