

# Self-Care for Caregivers: *How Special Needs Families Recharge*



**By Angela Nelson, MS, BCBA**  
*Executive Director of Family and  
Clinical Services, Rethink*

“Parents of special needs children have higher levels of stress. It’s becoming more important than ever to learn how to recharge.”



Several studies have shown that parents raising children with developmental, behavioral, or medical needs often experience high levels of stress, usually higher than parents who are not dealing with such needs. With this in mind, it’s very important to consider protective factors against care-giver burnout and ways to ensure parents have enough “gas in the tank” to provide the level of care that is needed. This is, of course, easier said than done. Sometimes it’s just a matter of justifying to ourselves that self-care is important and deserved.

There are certain things we provide our children, without any question, and that can apply to us too. Changing just one thing, adding one small tweak, making one tiny move towards self-care can uncover how impactful it can be. Once you’ve accomplished that one step and you see the benefit, you can add another. Parenting is not easy but parents do want to be the best parent they can be...and that can take some work. The good news is that this type of work, self-care that is, doesn’t have to be hard. Let’s look at some self-care tips that can be free, relaxing, and/or have a big payoff:

1. **Exercise-** this is no secret. Exercise has many benefits not just for our physical health but our mental and emotional health as well. Can’t afford a gym membership or find a babysitter? Consider this:
  - If your child enjoys the park, walk there or walk laps around the play structure while he/she plays
  - If your child is younger, consider more stroller walks as opposed to driving or even a stroller exercise group
  - If your child is older, suggest an after-dinner walk or swim as a family
  - If your child is energetic, play sports outside with them, have a silly dance party, or create a fun, active game
2. **Nutrition-** We want our children to eat well and grow up strong. Why can’t this apply to us too? Not enough time? Try a meal delivery service. Too expensive? These days, grocery stores are striving to add more produce and healthy options at generic prices. Even canned veggies are better than no veggies. There are also more healthy recipe websites and short, fun cooking videos on social media than ever before!
3. **Preventative medical care-** Again, just like our children’s well-child visits, we can treat ourselves well by caring for our medical health. Making an

---

annual physical for some blood work and a dental visit (ok, not the most fun thing you could do) can have major positive consequences. Giving yourself time to speak with your medical provider about concerns or being more proactive about your health can end up benefiting the whole family.

4. **Sleep-** Ah, the most elusive one. If you have young children or those who require 24/7 care, this can be challenging. From parents we've spoken to, many have gotten quite creative. From sharing weekend "sleep in" days with their spouses/partners, designating a night each week for going to bed extra early, to hiring a babysitter or using respite care to allow for a carved-out nap during the day, this is an individualized approach that can be doable with some planning.
5. **15-minutes of "me" time-** Hopefully there is more where that came from but if not, treasure this time. Sure, you may need to consult with #4 if your 15 minutes is prior to your child waking up. It could also be reframing how you view your commute to work, making it your time to listen to your favorite podcast (if you live in Los Angeles like me, that commute will be more than 15 min!). This time could be spent at a caregiver support group or connecting with a friend over the phone. Maybe you "stock up" those minutes and schedule an hour-long trip to yoga or to meditate. Thinking differently about the time you have alone, even if it's just 30 minutes to watch a TV show, can help you see it as special time for you.
6. **Saying "No" to extra obligations-** Parents are no strangers to birthday party invites, requests to help in the classroom, playdates, family events, etc. You can give yourself permission to cut down on obligations, especially if they aren't crucial to the wellbeing of your family. Missing a classmate's party won't generate a major crisis but it can free you up to destress a bit. Maybe it's time to prioritize destressing?
7. **Support system-** Creating a strong support system can be crucial to a special needs family. Whether you belong to a faith-based group, attend formal support groups, or lean on friends and family for help, this can be a lifeline for parents. Parents who are in your shoes, who can share resources and empathize, can

provide valuable relationships. Many parents find comfort in sharing similar experiences with other families.

8. **Additional employer benefits-** Don't forget about your employer-sponsored benefits. Most companies have a suite of excellent wellness benefits, from legal or counseling supports, incentive-based wellness and fitness programs, to meditation apps. Many companies have an employee assistance program (EAP), where parents can gain, among other things, counseling for themselves, their families, and their marriages. Having a child with special needs can cause wide-spread stress, seeping into other facets of life so counseling can be an excellent outlet. Your Rethink benefit can be another easy, free way to get the resources, training, and consultation you need to empower yourself to best support your child. Remember, your employer provides such benefits in the hopes that you'll take advantage of them and we hope you will too!

There are certain things in special needs families that we cannot control. However, the good news is there are many other aspects that we can. Making some small tweaks to help you feel better, even just slightly more capable or energized, can help you tackle some of life's not-so-controllable challenges. And remember, you can always reach out to Rethink for help today!

