



**SPECIAL NEEDS RESOURCE PROJECT**

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# Things to Think About!

## Sharpening Your Serenity Skills

By Linda Jorgensen

Everyday life is pretty hectic for most people. Work, school, general family life and the crazy schedules required to keep up with sports, lessons, family gatherings and other activities can make the most stalwart of parents feel more than a bit stressed at the end of the day. Those of us with children with disabling conditions or high acuity medical needs have the added stressors of constant care. Doctor visits, therapy appointments multiple times per week, teacher meetings at school, insurance claim follow ups, pre-authorizations to submit, case management visits, etc. etc. The list is endless. Toss in caring for a child that doesn't sleep through the night and the sleep deprivation alone is enough to throw even the most serene parent off kilter.

Too much stress is a serious problem. Tension induced symptoms such as lethargy, sadness, irritability, and overeating are the early stages of the emotional symptoms of stress. Excess stress can trigger physical responses as well. The body releases hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol into your system which gets your body ready for action by accelerating your heart rate and tensing large muscle groups, among other things. These hormones can overload your whole body causing problems with your gastrointestinal tract, immune system, is a cause of cardiovascular disease, chronic anxiety and a whole host of other illnesses and problems. Learning to control stressors will decrease the amount of stress your body is under and will help improve your overall health and how you get through those hectic days.

Given all the responsibilities we have it is unrealistic to expect that we can make our lives less hectic. We can schedule what we can, focus on getting some down time (Grump Busting, anyone?) and ensure we get as much sleep as we possibly can under the circumstances but our lives are still going to be hectic.

The one thing we can change is *how we respond* to stress. We can't make it go away but we can make it a little easier to handle.

### Identify What Makes You Crazy

All of us have our own stress triggers. There are many triggers we all have in common but we have our individual triggers as well. Figuring out what they are and then dealing with them, one at a time, can reduce the amount of stress we feel.

Putting a name to a stress trigger can sometimes be difficult. Often we can name a broad category such as money but when we look at the situation a bit deeper we discover it's the haphazard way we've been dealing with paying the bills which leaves things in a fiscal mess that causes our stress. And then there are the more subtle stressors we aren't even aware of.

Sometimes our body knows better than our mind which circumstances are causing problems. If you can't think of anything specific that causes you stress pay attention to your body. It will tell you a lot if you pay attention. Be on the lookout for stress symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, impatience and an upset gastrointestinal tract. Take a week or two and write down your symptoms along with when and where they occur. It may be you're having trouble every time you sit down to sort through your bills. Once you identify the trigger you can start working on a solution. Problems tend to appear smaller when you can find a solution. For example, perhaps it's time to find a good budgeting application to download that will help you get your bills sorted. It won't make the bills go away but it can sure make it easier to stay on top of them, thereby decreasing your stress.

### Think Positive and Build a Plan

Many of us find ourselves being hyper vigilant. We're constantly on the lookout for something to go wrong at home, with our child (or children) or just life in general. That NG tube that we just know will slide out when we aren't looking, the unexpected phone calls from school teachers we know will come out of the blue, and expecting denials of services for various reasons can put all of us on a constant edge. It's hard not to feel overwhelmed by daily living but allowing frazzled nerves to stay in charge constantly will crank our brains into fight-or-flight mode and keep it there. This puts those stress hormones into overdrive when

there's no physical emergency at hand to deal with. We're expecting the worst to happen before it actually does. It may be days before that NG causes a problem and weeks before the teacher feels the need to call you. And while expecting a denial is often a given it shouldn't be the reason we are on constant Red Alert.

Your body's stress response is tied to what you think about a given situation. Instead of thinking, "*I know it's going to happen, AGAIN, and I really hate it when it does*" we can think, "*Ok, so far so good. That tube is going to slide or get pulled out again soon, plan on it*". Once we identify what the stressor is we can build a plan. We know NG tubes will come out periodically. The trick is in having a plan for when it does. We have a portable supply kit with us when we leave the house, supplies are kept in an emergency box at school and there are plenty of supplies in the closet at home. We have what we need. When the tube does come out instead of thinking, "*What a pain! I don't have time for this right now!*" we can alter that negative thought into a positive one by replacing that thought with, "*This isn't exactly unexpected, I know what to do, I have the supplies and I can manage it*". By reminding ourselves that we are capable, take-charge survivors who can be prepared to take on what we're given we turn a negative, stress inducing response, into a positive affirmation that we can, indeed, handle a lot of what lands in our laps. That NG tube may have been an unpleasant surprise but you still have a say in how it is handled. Over time some of the things that are stressful now will become routine and we'll barely take notice.

### **Know When To Take Time Out (Otherwise Known As Grump Busting!)**

There are days when nothing seems to go right. A morning spent putting out proverbial fires, addressing problem phone calls, trying, and failing, to stick to routine and your stress meter can be pegged for the day before the clock strikes noon. When that happens it's time to take a break and do some Grump Busting! Give yourself a short break to do something pleasurable that you enjoy. A good distraction, even if it's only for a few minutes, can interrupt that fight-or-flight response by separating the brain from stressful input. Get everyone settled in a safe spot for a few minutes, if need be, and watch a puppy video online. Take a book out on your porch for 5 minutes, call a friend or simply sit in the sunshine and deep breath for a few minutes. Your mind will be calmer and you'll be better able to cope with what comes up next.

### **Pre-empting Stress**

We all know that stress is a given in our lives. It makes sense that we do what we can to decrease our fight-or-flight response to stressors as much as possible before they happen.

For longer lasting calm experts suggest trying regular stress reducing activities. Deep breathing, tai-chi, yoga, meditation, or another exercise of your choice on a weekly basis can help boost the body's resilience to stress and trigger the brain's reward center. All those good endorphins we gain when exercising increase. A little bit also goes a long way. An hour long class once or even twice a week or several shorter sessions at home can all help you feel calmer in stressful situations. It won't take away the stress but rather help you feel a bit calmer while you deal with it.

Stress isn't quite the huge monster some make it out to be. By identifying our triggers, building a plan of action and then working those plans when stressors arise, we become more able to deal with the situation at hand in a calmer fashion. Taking time out for pleasant events (Grump Busting!), periodic exercising and practicing being calm will make it a whole lot easier to relax over longer periods of time. And when we're relaxed and calm it's tough to feel stressed.

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