

Taking care of you

by Dan Coulter

Dan Coulter and his wife Julie produce videos to help families dealing with Asperger's syndrome and other special needs. You can find more of Dan's articles and information about his videos at coultervideo.com.

A while back, I wrote an article urging parents of kids with special needs to deal with stress by taking breaks and finding other ways to relax. Given that I've been burning the candle at both ends with a blowtorch recently, I thought it would be a good time to revisit the subject.

While I usually follow my own advice, I occasionally...sort of... backslide and catch myself doing things that I know are counter productive. Hey, I'm human.

In this case, however, I've been able to keep up with taking breaks and relaxing with exercise since the beginning of the year, even through a series of stress-

ful events. So, if you read the first anti-stress article and need a booster shot, this is my testimonial that taking some time for yourself pays off.

I did pretty good with breaks and exercise last year. But when my wife and I took on multiple projects in our business early in 2006 on top of the demands of family life, I risked getting sucked into the "nonstop work" vortex. This vortex was, too often, my daily life while I was in the corporate world. My wife has felt its pull for years, taking on the main role of dealing with schools and doctors for our two kids with special needs. I've talked with lots of special needs parents who know the vortex well.

Maybe getting a bit older has given me some perspective to help deal with its pull.

Whatever the reason, I'm convinced that continuing to make taking some personal time a priority in the face of demands and deadlines (not the top priority, but a priority) has kept me sane and in much better shape than I'd be in otherwise.

One of the best assets in my stress-beater portfolio is an early morning walk. For me, it has to be early morning. Once the phone starts ringing, getting away to walk is like trying to escape a black hole's gravity well. Walking early was a particular challenge because my wife and I tend to stay up late. There's always lots that needs doing, and the next thing you know, it's time for *The Daily Show* at 11 PM and we might as well stay up a bit later. It's hard to stay up late and get up to exercise before the workday starts. One solution to this was taping *The Daily Show* to watch during lunch the next day.

I carry a small voice recorder on my walk to capture any good ideas or "to do list" items that my mind generates along the way. This way I can clear my head of them and deal with them later without stressing out that I'll forget.

Another benefit of walking daily and cutting down on my meal portions has been losing 20 pounds. You know those weight loss commercials that look so bogus? The ones where people go on a wonder diet, lose weight, and tell you how much better they feel? Well, my wonder diet was just eating less, but the feeling better part is true.

I've seen a lot of people deal with stress. I've always admired the people who dealt with it well and tried to model their behavior. But it was hard to model someone who dealt with stress by taking time for himself when I felt guilty doing it myself. It's easier after you've given it a try and see that it makes you more productive.

Managing stress also can help you deal with other people.

When stressed, many folks tend to withdraw into themselves and focus on the task at hand. Without intending to, they risk being non-responsive or short with others. No surprise, this turns people off.

If you have a child with special needs, you can use all the support you can get. But if your reaction to stress is to withdraw, you may actually alienate people who could potentially help. This includes school personnel, friends, neighbors, relatives, and especially people you meet for the first time. Reducing stress can help you stay open to people and get help and understanding when you need it most. In addition to helping me keep fit, my walk helps my attitude.

I also take short breaks during the rest of the day. I figure that even if you have tremendous demands on your time, you deserve a bit of balance in your life. The scale may tip heavily towards your responsibilities, but if it tips too far, you risk falling over. And where would that leave the people who depend on you?

When you stretch yourself too thin, you also risk losing yourself and some of the best of what you have to offer the people you care most about. You can tell you've been lost when you suddenly find yourself again—in a song on the radio or a line from a book or a movie. Maybe you're looking at a picture. But you hear or see something that shoots to the center of who you are and is instantly, recognizably special to you. At these moments, you touch some of the most valuable things you have to offer your family. Not just food and shelter and contact. Those parts that make you feel your worth as a person. Thoughts that generate caring and confidence and comfort.

It's easy to lose touch with them when you're stressed. A little relaxation can help you find them—and share them.

Your stress reducer may be different from mine. While I can recommend walking, I think almost anything you enjoy doing can be helpful if it gets your mind off your problems and lets you relax for a while and recharge your batteries.

Just remember, if it's your job to take care of everyone, that includes you.