

# Tips For Parents: Coping & Thriving with Autism

By Angela WEST, MS, BCBA, LBA

**H**ave you ever heard a flight attendant go through the pre-flight safety check with the passengers? Every pre-flight safety check emphasizes that caregivers should “*put your oxygen mask on first*” before placing the mask on their child. Naturally, this goes against our instincts as parents and caregivers.

At first, it sounds like a ghastly idea. But if you, as the caregiver, lose consciousness, then your child is left helpless. Parents of children diagnosed with autism face many difficult challenges and stressors throughout a given day. It is important to remember to “*put your oxygen mask on first*” to ensure you can be the best advocate for your child.

*Some tips to help you cope with day-to-day stressors and challenges*

## 1. Put your oxygen mask on first

- Simply put, make time for self-care and sleep. To better support your child, you need to care of yourself and remain healthy and strong
- Take time to drink plenty of water and eat balanced meals throughout the day. Perhaps that means some food prep for the week to make sure you have grab-n-go options on the busier days of therapy appointments
- Make time to exercise and keep your regular appointments with your primary care physician to keep your own health in check



## 2. Utilize your support system

- Reach out to your family and friends and schedule times they may be able to pitch in and give you some downtime to refresh. Maybe there are one or two evenings a week that someone can spend the night and offer nighttime assistance to your child while you sleep. Or perhaps someone can support you on a weekend with a daytime respite
- Join online support groups to connect with other parents and caregivers who are on the same path. They may be able to provide tips from their experiences

## 3. Seek help; talk about it

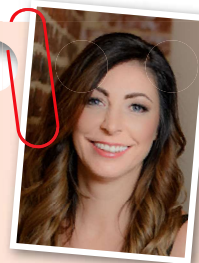
- Just as your child can thrive with specialized therapy tailored to their needs, you too can benefit from some support therapy. Reach out to local counselors or psychologists to set up an appointment to talk through your stress and concerns. Your primary care physician or your child's therapist may also be able to connect you with resources
- Depression is real and there is an increased risk for parents of children diagnosed with autism. You are plunged into an unknown world with little initial knowledge and expected to make life-changing decisions. Worry is a natural reaction, but talking it through with an impartial person can really help decrease your stress level and shed light into the dark frightening corners

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## 4. Just breathe

- If we are honest, most parents find it difficult to carve out time to stop and take a breath, so for a parent of a child with autism it can seem like an impossible task. Ask yourself: “when in the day can I sneak a few minutes to take a break and focus my thoughts?”

Through maintaining your self-care, you'll find you are more energized to complement your child's growth with activities at home. You might want to consider connecting with a local autism support organization in your area. Groups like these can further aid your self-care and support family time through fun activities like virtual scavenger hunts, movie days, and other events for the whole family. By ensuring you have the right tools and supports in-place, your family can cope and thrive with autism.



### **Angela West, MS, BCBA, LBA**

serves as Chief Clinical Officer of Behavioral Framework, a company serving autistic children in Maryland and Virginia through the latest science and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy techniques.

Angela is Board Certified and licensed as a Behavior Analyst in both Virginia and Maryland. She has a long history of developing and expanding ABA programs in both Maryland and Northern Virginia. Angela's devotion further led her to meet with key local and state government stakeholders and lobby on behalf of ABA Medicaid funders to ensure ABA treatment reaches all families.

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