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ABSTRACT

Addressed to parents of children with learning disabilities (LD) or attention deficit disorder, this paper explores the dangers of falling into codependent behaviors and stresses the importance of parents taking care of themselves. The codependent parent is described as always putting the child first and as trying to control everything about the child and those who interact with him/her. The paper considers such aspects of this relationship as the uncontrollable nature of children with LD, coping with stress, and dealing with chronic grief. It specifically encourages parents to: (1) find healthy ways to express feelings, (2) plan time away from the child, (3) lay guilt to rest, (4) take breaks to refresh yourself, (5) develop friends and intellectual pursuits unrelated to the exceptional child, (6) conserve energy for the most important things, (7) take care of your body, (8) take frequent deep breaths, (9) practice acceptance, and (10) say often, "I am not my child." (DB)

Before the well runs dry: Taking Care of Yourself as the Parent of a LD/ADD Child

by Jeanne Gehret, M.A.
Presented Spring 1993 at Learning Disabilities Association International Conference, San Francisco

As parents, we can become so caught up in helping our offspring that we neglect our own well-being. Youngsters with learning disabilities (LD) or attention deficit disorder (ADD) demand exceptional attention from parents to get through every day. They need more structuring, mental stimulation, direct teaching, or continuous help with social situations. Some can't wait for us to complete our own tasks before giving them our attention. Others create disturbances at home or school that require our constant intervention.

As an exceptional parent, you may feel like a little red ball on the end of a string attached to a paddle. Every time you get to the end of your tether, you get snapped back--abruptly. Talk on the phone--snap! Your child asks a question or creates a disturbance. Spend time with a friend--snap! Your child interrupts with an "urgent need" that isn't urgent after all. Sit down to read--guess who wants you to do something for her, now that you're free? And if you spend time with a sibling, your exceptional child may become jealous, interfering with the activity or misbehaving so that you have to snap your attention back to the one who usually has it.

The issue of siblings is important enough that I have devoted my newest book, entitled *I'm Somebody Too*, to this topic. It looks at ADD behavior through the eyes of other siblings in the family. But for now let's focus on you. Do you ever have the feeling that your exceptional child takes center stage in your life? Do you find that you have let go of most relationships and activities that don't revolve around your special needs youngster?

Have you become an efficient problem-solving machine without a life of your own or a thought for your own welfare? Do you find yourself wanting to escape into long hours of sleeps or wish you could make your emotional pain go away with drugs or alcohol?

Codependence

If so, you may have become codependent and acquired many of the characteristics of a person with an alcoholic family member. I'd like to explore the codependent behavior of exceptional parents and the importance of caring for ourselves, so that we can continue helping our children.

Bestselling author Melodie Beattie, who wrote *Codependent No More*, explains that the term "codependent" originally referred to people whose lives were affected by their involvement with drug or alcohol addicts. However, it has now expanded to include anyone whose life has become unmanageable because they live in a committed relationship with emotionally or mentally disturbed people; with those who have disabilities, chronic illness, or behavior problems--in short, people from families with members who are troubled, needy, and dependent. Furthermore, codependent people let another's behavior affect them so much that they become obsessed with that effort to control.

There is a joke that circulates in addiction circles: A codependent is in the process of dying and someone else's life flashes before his eyes. In other words, codependents *always* put the other person first -- till the bitter end!

Examples of Codependence

Now there is nothing wrong with taking care of youngsters who are troubled, needy, and dependent. When we give true service to another, our efforts arise from genuine compassion and do not create dependency. In such a case we require no external reward in order to feel gratified.

Too often, however, the out-of-controlness of our LD/ADD children make us into control freaks. We often extend ourselves beyond helpful interventions in the home,

school, and the medical field; we try to control everything about our child and everyone who interfaces with her.

Furthermore, everyone else in the family may take the back seat to our exceptional child. All our conversations may center around her, as do all family and personal plans. We're always looking for new ways to satisfy *that* child's needs--whether that is to maintain her present progress, cure her problem, or help her excel. We're so caught up with our exceptional child that we have no time to do anything for ourselves, our spouses, or even our other children. If we start doing something for another member of the family and our exceptional child asks for the slightest thing, we're likely to act like the red ball on the paddle. We immediately drop whatever we're doing and snap back to number one.

When these patterns become engrained, we neglect our hobbies and friends. We're so intent on solving the problem--whether it's to maintain, cure, or help the child excel--that we find it difficult to have fun and be spontaneous. And, as Melodie Beattie says, we "react to everything as if it's a crisis because we have lived with so many crises for so long that crisis reaction has become a habit."

When we're obsessed, we can't think about or enjoy anything except taking care of our special children. We need these youngsters to need us, feeling that they can't get along without us, even though, in some instances, they can.

Brian has emotional outbursts, so his father avoids asking him to do anything he dislikes. Sarah's attention wanders after a half-hour of homework, so her mother sits by her side during the entire homework session. Because Ricardo has trouble making friends, his mother arranges visits or outings for him and organizes every moment to make it a positive experience--even though at eight years old the boy is capable of some successful interactions.

We may grow to resent such children because they seem to demand so much time and energy that we have nothing left over. They, in turn, don't seem to love us for our efforts; they react with boredom, increased helplessness, and diminished self-esteem

because we've removed all challenge, all initiative, in the name of protection and caretaking.

Uncontrollable

When we try to control an LD/ADD child, we're setting ourselves up for certain frustration because these youngsters are frequently unpredictable and uncontrollable. We can spend our entire lives seeking that elusive physical cure or behavior modification program that will make everything all right. An impulsive child may throw a tantrum about leaving the ring toss in the amusement park when the other children want to go on the roller coaster. Both things are fun, but the LD/ADD child must have it his own way.

Also, exceptional children may have mood swings and lash out at us viciously just when we're least prepared to deal with it. Jennifer's mom has just worn herself out hosting the perfect birthday party for her daughter, and now Jennifer is tired and overstimulated. She asks for one more story before bed, and her mother refuses. The girl has a tantrum, crying that her mother doesn't love her and never reads to her. The mother, who by now is running on empty, gives up her few moments of relaxation to read that bedtime story. At times like these, we feel resentful because the exceptional child takes us for granted and walks all over us.

It's no wonder that such child does not respect us, however. How can they learn to honor parents who don't respect themselves? We tell ourselves that our personal needs and desires are unimportant next to our child's. We find ourselves saying yes when we mean no, doing things we don't want to, and not doing the things we desire. This can extend beyond the immediate family into all our relationships, so that we let everyone take advantage of us. We feel used, depressed, and angry.

Stress

Feeling this way is probably normal, considering that we live with chronic, unhealthy stress right in our homes, which is where we're supposed to relax. Although you are probably well-acquainted with stress, I would like to spend a few moments talking

about the specific ways it affects our bodies and minds so that you can better understand some of my recommendations.

Dr. Edward Abraham, author of *Freedom From Back Pain*, says that stress begins when we perceive a situation as a challenge that we feel intensely about. This releases adrenaline and other stress hormones into the blood; the blood is then diverted from outside of the body to central circulation in the vital organs and long muscles. Our skin becomes less sensitive and we're less aware of any kind of pain. The same thing happens in the brain: blood is withdrawn from the forebrain, where we do conscious planning, to other brain areas that focus emotion and stimulate motor movements.

Stress helps us focus on one clear objective, ignoring other priorities. This instinctive response gives us superhuman energy to do a variety of difficult things: pull out one toy after another for a child who bores easily; spend an hour arguing with an obsessive teen who wants to engage in destructive behavior; or monitor homework all evening after working all day. In this way, stress gives us strength to rise to difficult occasions.

Our prehistoric ancestors usually met stress in a very physical way by fighting an enemy or fleeing. Afterwards, they collapsed to sleep and the adrenaline and hormones that were not used up in physical activity were eliminated from the body. Having worked through the entire stress cycle, they woke up refreshed.

We modern parents, unfortunately, don't usually complete the cycle. Very few of our stressful situations involve fight or flight. Instead, most involve continuous emotional strains that lack convenient outlets. When we have a child who is difficult to care for, we get too little healthy exercise to release muscular tension on daily basis. This kind of unrelieved stress, instead of making us strong, makes us weak and sick. One mom in a Massachusetts support group told me, for example, that all the women in her group had at one time or another been treated for depression.

Chronic Grief

Like parents of other handicapped children, we parents of exceptional youngsters can suffer from chronic grief. Because of our youngsters, we ride an endless rollercoaster of denial, anger, sadness, bargaining, and finally, acceptance. These things will be with us for a long time, maybe for the rest of our lives. Grief work is different from self-pity in that we face our sadness honestly but we don't wallow in it. While we don't have to like it, we can come to recognize the phases of this process, work through them, and go on.

Set up mechanisms for yourself so that when you get into a particularly painful place, you know where to turn. This may be a friend or teacher, minister, counselor, support group, or book. Tapping into the healing resources instead of fighting the pain hastens healing. Recognize that emotions come to pass -- they don't stay. Let feelings flow through you and out of you, rather than blocking them, and you will be healthier.

You may be aware of some of the effects of stress--the pain in your neck or back, your short temper. But it goes even further than that, as illustrated by this example of a therapist who has a teenager with ADD.

"I was standing in the supermarket with my son, and he started mouthing off and giving me a hard time," said the therapist. "I began yelling at him, and had to resist the impulse to run him over with the shopping cart."

Now you may smile at the irony of a therapist admitting to such lack of self-control. After all, she's supposed to be an expert at solving problems with difficult children. How can this happen? Easy. Her physiological response to stress decreased the flow of blood to her brain's professional, creative, problem-solving area, leaving her only emotion and past experience to deal with this situation. In his book on back pain, Doctor Abraham adds that unrelieved stress can make us feel disconnected and confused, and react in overly emotional ways; then we feel bad because we keep repeating the same ineffective behaviors; we may feel constantly drained and generally blue.

As Melodie Beattie says, "it is normal to react to stress....It is heroic and lifesaving to learn how to not react and to act in more healthy ways."

I'd like to devote the rest of this space to outlining ten of my favorite ways to deal with the chronic stresses of parenting an LD/ADD child. Many of these have been adapted from the Twelve Steps followed by alcoholics and their families. Some of these are attitudes, some are activities; all are important. I cannot guarantee that you always will stop yourself from running someone over with a shopping cart, but if you practice these regularly, you will build up a reserve of calm that will lessen the chance of that happening. Of course, if you are truly depressed, you may need formal therapy as well.

First, find healthy ways to express your feelings, especially grief and anger. You may think you're doing a good job of covering these up, but actually the effort you use to hold them inside takes away from your ability to feel positive emotions. My favorite way to do this is so simple that I recommend it to children in *I'm Somebody Too*.

Take a deep breath and groan out loud, listing your problems. (inhale) "Ohhhh, I'm exhausted. Ohhhh, the doctor bills. Ohhh, Amy's never going to get better. Ohhh, I never get to have fun." Now if you're like me, and you prefer to groan outside while walking, you'll probably quickly earn a reputation for being eccentric, but at least you'll feel better!

This exercise is helpful because it gives you an audience for your problems --you! Of course, you can also do this with a spouse or friend if he or she promises to listen without comment or criticism. It also helps you take deep breaths and rid your body of the toxins that create stress.

I often find that after I listen to myself groan and complain for five or ten minutes, even *I* get tired of the litany. When that happens, I switch to a monologue of happy, hopeful things in a pleasant voice: "Oh, I'm going to the movies this weekend. Oh, the sun is shining. Oh, it was so good to hear from Gini today." By the time I've completed

this exercise, I've restored my emotional balance--not by ignoring my feelings, but by hearing and working through them.

Devote equal time to positive emotions, and they will grow. Celebrate a happy day or a triumph by drawing a smiley face on your calendar, hugging yourself or someone else, or simply telling yourself out loud over and over how wonderful you are. Happiness is often a matter of focus. If you decide that your cup is half full rather than half empty, you'll be more joyful and serene.

Second, plan time away from your child. Don't be the first volunteer at school; instead, take advantage of that time to do things you need to do without your child. Summer camps and recreational programs provide other opportunities to see that your youngster's time away from you will be a positive experience. Choose these programs intelligently so that your child is prepared for the situation and the caregiver or instructor is prepared for your child.

Third, lay guilt to rest--that inappropriate belief that you can't afford to take a break because your child will suffer. Well-meaning friends and therapists may say you are the best thing your child has going for her--you're so tuned in to her needs and so determined to see them met, you know and love her better than anyone else. But how will she get her needs met if your well goes dry, and you are her main source? You owe it to your youngster to fill your well regularly so there's always a flowing supply.

If you really are the best person for the job of parenting this particular child, the world needs you in that job, rested and ready for it every day. Society owes you a big thanks, whether they realize it or not, for keeping that child out of a hospital or a drug treatment program. Be a wise steward of your own resources and take regular breaks so you can stay on this job as long as you're needed.

You will feel less guilty about taking a break if you prepare the person who will be acting as surrogate parent. Give her a fighting chance to hit it off with your child. This way she will agree to help you again and your child will not fuss about leaving you next

time. Also, if you know your child is safe and well-treated, you will have a more relaxing break.

Within reason, prepare the child for the new situation, too. Often, as we make such preparations, we anticipate unpleasant situations that might arise. That's fine, but we should also leave room for pleasant surprises. Your child may love trying new foods, routines, or spending time with pets that you don't have at home. Similarly, don't go overboard warning the other adults about your child's bad behaviors. The other parent may appreciate qualities in your child that you never noticed or may consider a behavior charming that you find obnoxious. Don't talk her out of it!

Fourth, when you take a well-deserved break, **fill up your well.** Don't deplete it by doing chores! Remember this principle: the more your child draws out of your well, the more you need to fill it up. At times of heavy demand, spend lots of time on yourself. When your child is doing better or her needs are being met by someone else, you can spend less time on yourself and attend to some of those tasks you need to catch up on.

If you have a child who clings to you, it's even more important for you to detach regularly and take care of yourself. You can find a competent caretaker to tolerate a troublesome child for a few hours. Even if the youngster chooses to scream and stuff cookies in his mouth the entire time, it probably won't harm him, and it will do you a world of good to be away.

Fifth, develop friends and intellectual pursuits unrelated to your exceptional child. Take up painting, sing in the choir or attend concerts, join a discussion group. Volunteer at your city's public television station or the library---someplace where you will be able to discuss the world outside your home. Of course, if you have a job, some of this outside interest may be fulfilled by your work. Let yourself be absorbed in your job and your co-workers while you're there, rather than making it another audience to rehash your home problems.

If you are married, make a project of keeping that marriage healthy. The strain of exceptional children can wear us out so we have nothing left to give the significant adult in our lives. Disagreements about care of the child can also erode marital happiness. One study of families where children have attention deficit disorder concluded that parents of ADD children are 8.5 times more likely to divorce.

To combat this stress and strain, you may decide, like one smart couple, to make your bedroom off-limits for discussions of thorny topics. Insist that the children go to bed or entertain themselves for at least ten minutes a day so you can touch base with each other as adults. Send each other cards at work, or put a note in your spouse's lunch. Let your children know that although they are very important to you both, your spouse was your first love and still occupies a central place in your heart.

Sixth, conserve your energies for the most important things. Resist the temptation to join every group and volunteer effort. We codependents often have a false sense of our own importance and responsibility, feeling that nothing will get done unless we do it. As a result, we frequently burn ourselves out in unnecessary service, eventually making ourselves no good to anyone.

Remember that as an exceptional parent, you already have extra responsibilities for frequent consultations with teachers, counselors, and physicians and daily care for your child. Don't add to your stress by baking all the cookies for the classroom, serving on every church committee, or organizing the neighborhood block party every year. Do these things when they're fun and feel good to you; otherwise, leave them for someone else who has empty hours to fill.

Seventh, take care of your body, remembering that body, mind, and spirit work together. Just as athletes can achieve physical mastery by focusing their minds, so we parents can focus our minds and emotions by taking care of our bodies.

Our son, who is devoted to his hamster, noticed that Munchkin had little cuts on either side of his mouth from chewing on his cage. We also noticed that the hamster was

sleeping fitfully. When we fixed his wheel so he could run freely and get the exercise he needed, he calmed down, stopped chewing, and slept better.

So next time you feel yourself reduced to chewing on your cage, take a lesson from the hamster and get some exercise!

Middle-age aches and pains or poorly-toned muscles can make us cranky and short of energy. Regular exercise invigorates us and gets rid of stress by moving the blood to all parts of the body, including the creative part of the brain mentioned earlier. When you take care of your body, you benefit and so does your family.

If you think that getting regular exercise is self-indulgence, consider for a moment how you take care of your car. We used to have an old clunker whose oil light never went off. We had to keep track of the mileage and then remember, at a certain point, to add oil. Sure enough, one day when I was six months pregnant and driving on a snowy express-way in rush hour, the car ran totally out of oil and the engine seized up. We had to junk the car and get a new one. I'll tell you, creating such an emergency took a lot longer than it would have to do routine maintenance on the car.

It's the same way with the self. By taking routine care of yourself, you'll be less likely to need costly physical or psychological care in an emergency. You'll always be running well. And if a problem does arise where you need care, please don't put it off because you're too busy with your child. Do it right away before it gets worse. Otherwise, your entire family will suffer added expense and the inconvenience of having you out of commission. After all, you are at least as valuable as your car!

So if you have a competitive sport like volleyball, tennis or golf, make regular dates to play with others. If you don't have a social sport, make a regular date with yourself to take horseback riding lessons, join an aerobics class, or swim laps. If you're home most of the day, it's best to go out for your exercise and see others. If you spend your days working away from home, you may prefer to work out on a rowing machine, stair climber,

or treadmill at home, or simply schedule half-hour walks around your neighborhood three times a week.

Listen to you body; it will often tell you what's bothering you and what you need. For instance, a man who grew up with a troublesome brother told me that he always got stomach aches because as a child the dinner table was the battleground for his brother's misdemeanors. Whenever his stomach bothers him now, he knows it's time to look for conflict that needs to be resolved -- or at least shelved until a better time. In *I'm Somebody Too*, the girl has sore throats because she is afraid to ask for the love and support she needs from her parents. You may find that you are nervous and irritable because you need exercise or that you get headaches when too many demands are placed at once--it's time to get some quiet time alone.

Eighth, take frequent deep breaths. Yoga, which is probably the world's oldest form of relaxation, teaches healthy breathing before anything else. Deep breathing is only one of the many yoga techniques that can save your sanity. I strongly encourage you to sign up for weekly yoga sessions through your YMCA, health club, community education, or yoga center. Yoga is not a religion, nor does it encourage you to put your body into impossible pretzel-like positions. Rather, it is a series of gentle stretches that protect you from injury by balancing one side of the body with the other.

Ninth, practice acceptance. The Serenity Prayer, originally written for Alcoholics Anonymous, can be a lifesaver for you, too.

"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference."

By doing our grief work, we occasionally reach the place where we can accept our lot as exceptional parents. However, Helen Featherstone in her excellent book, *A*

Difference in the Family, cautions against seeing acceptance as a kind of plateau that we achieve once and afterwards always feel firmly underfoot. Acceptance comes and goes, she says, and never blots out loss and regret; it's just that we begin to integrate our child's handicap with the entire fabric of our lives and go on.

Tenth, say often, "I am not my child."

I am not my child; I do not own my child, and her success/failure is not the same as my own. We parents who have children with more than their share of problems learn early what is true about all children: As Kahlil Gibran says in *The Prophet,* they come through us, but are not of us. We hold them for awhile, but they stand as individuals before the world and their Creator.

Although you are responsible for teaching and nurturing your child, she has her own spiritual path and is responsible for her own attitude toward life, insofar as she is capable. She can respond positively or negatively to every challenge placed before her, and that is how her soul is formed.

Just as our children are responsible for their own attitude and adjustments, we parents are responsible for our own. We are more than just Mom or Dad, we are valuable persons in our own right; our needs and opinions count. The spark of divine fire that ignited the universe also burns in you and me. So let us size up our family situations honestly and plan the best way to keep our lights burning. When we are in balance within ourselves, we add beauty, order and harmony to every situation we encounter.

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