

Issue 10

Exceptional Needs TODAY

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WITH YOUR
AUTISTIC CHILD

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MANAGING HOLIDAY
STRESS

From the Editor's Desk

GROWING TOGETHER

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."
—Helen Keller

Life can be a bit stressful—even overwhelming at times. Whether you're a parent, an educator, a therapist, or you have an exceptional needs diagnosis, it is paramount to find ways to work and grow together. We develop strength and confidence when we seek new methods to manage the more challenging parts of our lives, including ways to protect and support one another.

When I attended a special needs summit earlier this year, I asked participants to share the topics most important to them. I am delighted to say this issue reflects at least a dozen of those requests.

Navigating puberty was at the top of this list, including advice on approaching the infamous "sex talk." Fortunately, one of our writers, JC Ellinger, is currently navigating this stage with her teenage son and was open to providing firsthand advice. Her piece, *Easing the "Sex Talk" With Your Autistic Child*, emphasizes the necessity of a safe and honest discussion of sex and relationships with teens and includes tips on facilitating such talks.

Participants also stressed the need for fresh guidance on preparing a loved one for adulthood. Several contributors—a therapist, a parent, and a self-advocate—jumped at the chance to share their thoughts with us. In his piece, *Neurodiverse Recommendations for Launching Into Young Adulthood, College, and Beyond*, Patrick LaCount, PhD, describes three skill areas crucial for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) management. Tammy Flynn, author, podcaster, and caregiver to her son with special needs, has penned an invaluable piece called *Transitioning From A Pediatrician to An Adult Primary Care Physician When There Are Special Needs*. Recent college graduate Coral Levkovitz shares some positive life habits she used to manage her ADHD diagnosis in *Taking Control of ADHD as a Student*.

Taking the time to step back to appreciate and support one another is also essential for growth. Brandon Clark, PsyD, BCBA, has authored an important piece directed at a large audience called *Collaboration Among Parents, Teachers, and ABA Therapists Improves Outcomes for Special Education*. Not only does collaboration boost awareness and progress—it makes students feel like they have a special team of support.

Finding ways to connect is critical to development. Richard Schreiber, PMP, CSM, CSPO, founder of the NYC Autism Community Group, shares his journey with his autistic daughter in his article, *Listen To Our Children; Get Into Their World*. Be sure to read as he lovingly explains how he altered his parenting tactics to engage

in meaningful exchanges with his child. Another article you wouldn't want to miss is columnist Kate C. Wilde's *Encouraging and Expanding a Child With Special Needs' Ability To Play and Engage With You*. Kate clearly explains how to use a child's interests to encourage active participation, as well as different approaches to show support when a child appears uninterested in interaction.

With the holidays right around the corner, we reached out to author Dawn M. Barclay on some sports-centered vacation options for seasonal activities that are likely to prove accessible and enjoyable for family and friends. We hope her article, *Top Sports Vacation Ideas for Families With Differing Abilities*, inspires families to seek ways to connect and grow together. For advice on easing holiday preparation stressors, read *Managing Holiday Stress While Balancing Exceptional Needs* by columnist Meshell Baylor, MHS. And don't miss Deanna Picon's piece, *Leaning on Friends: Holiday Stress When There Are Special Needs*, as she encourages readers to reach out to friends using a heartwarming email exchange between two autism moms.

When we work together, GREAT things can happen.

Best,

Amy KD Tobik

Editor-in-Chief, *Exceptional Needs Today*
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PLEASE JOIN OUR
EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNITY

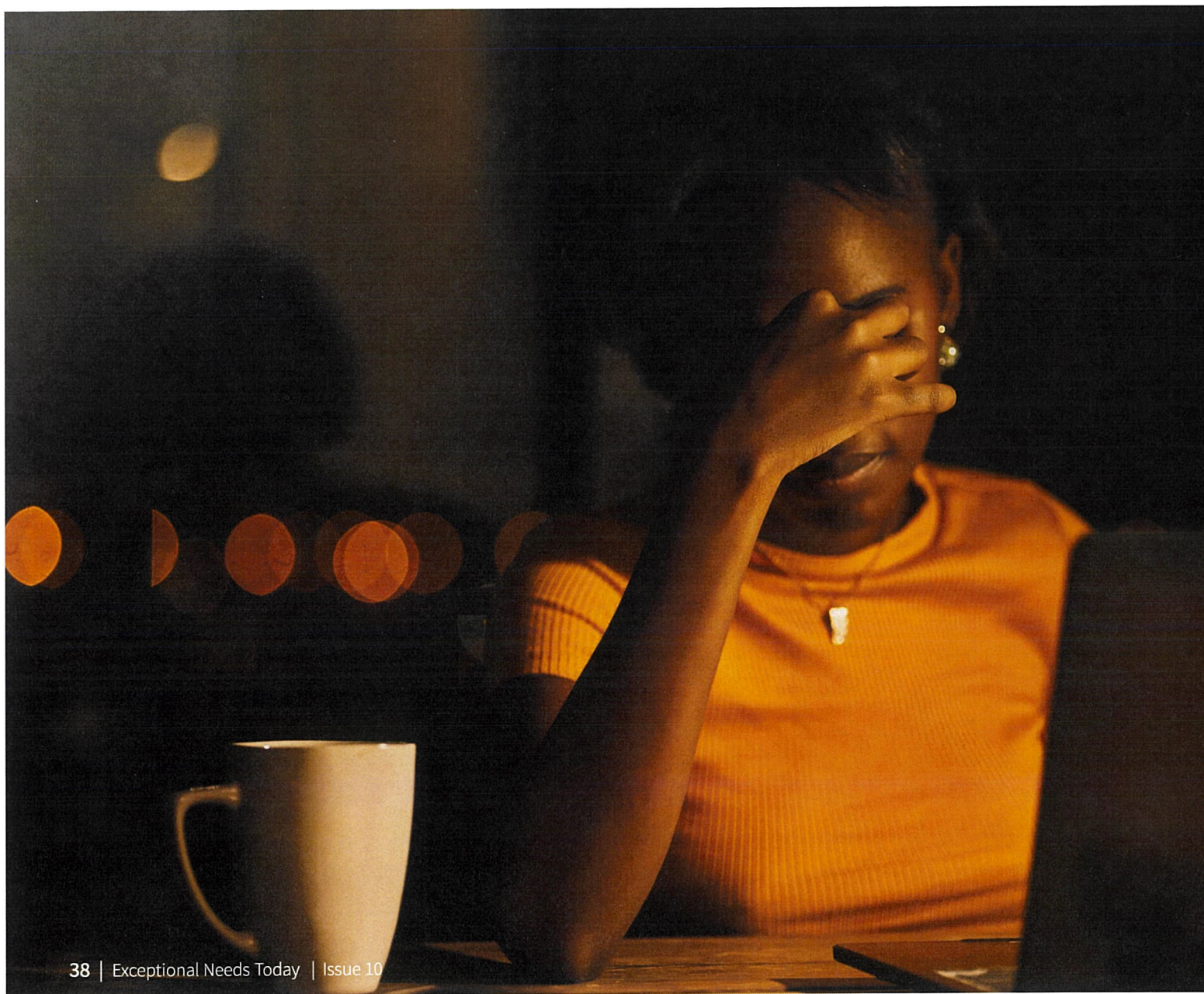


Leaning On Friends:

Holiday Stress When There Are Special Needs

By **Deanna Picon**

Beautiful holiday decorations. Spectacular public events. Gift shopping. Memorable gatherings with family and friends. For many, the holidays represent a joyous and celebratory occasion. But for others, the stress and increased pressures brought about by this time of year can lead to anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Everyone handles it differently. I'm going to share how my best friend Brenda and I managed her holiday stress. It all started with a late-night text she sent, asking me to read this email.





Hey Michelle!

Sorry for this long note, but I need to vent, and it's too late to call you.

I had a really bad night. I just got back from the urgent care center near the mall. Rob and Johnny went with me. Thank goodness it has extended hours. If not, we would've been sitting in the emergency room at Memorial for hours.

You know I've been feeling bad for a couple of days. Too much on my mind. Not sleeping well. I guess my stress and worrying got the best of me. After dinner, I started having chest pressure, a rapid heartbeat and felt weak. I really thought I was having a heart attack.

The doctor examined me right away, took my blood pressure, and did an EKG. Fortunately, everything was fine. It was an anxiety attack. She said I need to take better care of myself, get more rest, eat better, and try to relax. Like, who has time to do this?

It's been a tough week. I asked Tom if I could take my vacation week during the Christmas break so I could stay with Johnny during his recess. He keeps giving me the runaround, saying he needs a few people in the office and how everyone wants off. Tom says employees got spoiled from working from home because of the pandemic.

It's like, "Hello! I have a seven-year-old son with autism." It's not like I can drop him off at my local childcare center for a week, and the staff will know how to take care of him. They're not Special Ed teachers. Tom knows I don't have much help. I mean, where's the compassion?

Hopefully, my parents will visit us for Christmas. But my dad recently had knee replacement surgery and might be out of commission for a few weeks. I'm worried about him.

Rob and I have been working overtime to make extra money so we can buy some gifts and maybe treat ourselves to a weekend getaway for Valentine's Day next year. My sister will take care of Johnny. Debbie said it's no problem since I gave her a few months' notice. But with all this inflation, everything keeps going up, so we'll see. I get sticker shock every time I go to the supermarket or gas station.

And then there's Melanie. Rob's cousin is having her annual family Christmas dinner. You know how she likes to show off. Melanie probably had a few tantrums during the past two-and-a-half years because she couldn't entertain due to the pandemic.

I really can't stand being around her. Melanie always makes insensitive comments and stares at Johnny when he's twirling his head or making sounds. She doesn't understand why Johnny isn't improving, especially with all the speech, occupational, and physical therapy he's receiving. And she constantly gives me that condescending look, like I'm not a good mother. Can you believe her!?

Rob really wants to go to Melanie's dinner because he hasn't seen a lot of his family in two-and-a-half years. We're having arguments about it. I don't want to go. I'd rather stay home alone and stream some movies.

I'm so depressed. Call me tomorrow.

I received Brenda's text around 11:00 p.m. As soon as I read her email, I responded back. Here's what I wrote.

Hey Brenda!

How are you feeling? Do you need anything?

I'm so glad you went to urgent care to make sure you're OK. You know what, that doctor was right! This was a wake-up call. It's time to slow down and take a breath.

I know you've been worried, but I didn't think it would affect you like this.

I thought about what you said. Let's break everything down, one step at a time.

We need to get our act together about our health. If we don't, who's going to take care of Johnny and Sam? There's a ton of information and videos about nutrition and exercise online. I'm sure we can download some meditation apps on our phones. We'll find a way to fit some healthy habits into our crazy schedule, even if it's only ten minutes a day.

The holidays are difficult for a lot of people. I think it's tougher for us because we have special needs kids. And whether we like it or not, our families are different. Nothing like what we see in holiday commercials and movies. But that doesn't mean we can't enjoy the holidays.

Nobody really understands how hard it is raising children with disabilities except parents like us. We manage our kids' daily and personal needs. We have to deal with school staff, messed up bus routes, going to doctors and therapy appointments, and fighting for services. And that's just taking care of our sons' needs. What about ours?

It's overwhelming! We have too much on our plates. So, it's OK to feel sad, frustrated, or angry. Remember, we're human.

Tom's a terrible boss. He probably booked his Caribbean vacation already and needs you to run things while he's gone. You're the best manager he has, and Tom doesn't appreciate you. It's time to look for a new job. Let's update your resume and find you a better-paying job with more flexibility.

I'm sorry about your dad, but your mom will take good care of him. He hates not being able to do things, so I'm sure he'll recover sooner than you think.

Don't waste time on Melanie. If you're not comfortable going to her house, don't go. Who wants to feel like they're under a microscope?!

The same thing happened when my cousin Bruce came over on New Year's Day. Sam's nine now, so it was three years ago. Bruce treated Sam the same way Melanie does with Johnny. Needless to say, that was the last time Bruce came to our house.

Now I only visit or have people over who understand Sam's condition and support our family. Melanie's clueless and wouldn't last a day with what we go through. I'm genuinely touched by how many people tell me they respect and admire Greg and me. They see first-hand how difficult it can be to raise a child with special needs.

Let Rob go to dinner, hang out with his family, and have a good time. Make sure he has lots of pictures and videos on his cellphone, so everyone can see how sweet and handsome Johnny is.

FYI. You and Johnny are celebrating Christmas at our house. And the day after, we're going out for some stress relief, retail therapy. It's time for a spa/shopping day. We'll treat ourselves to a mani/pedi and catch some "After Christmas" sales at the mall. Most things will be 50% off, so we'll save some cash and have some fun. Rob and Greg can watch the kids.

And please, no guilt trips. We need this! In fact, we should make this one of our New Year's resolutions. Every month, we'll do something special for ourselves. Home facials sound good to me.

Talk soon!

Brenda and I spoke for an hour the next morning. We felt so much better afterward. During the holidays, when life can become really stressful, we appreciate each other even more. Our friendship is the best gift we could ever give each other.

Perhaps if you're going through some of the same things we were, consider reaching out to others. You might be pleasantly surprised. Many people are filled with good cheer this time of year and may not mind lending a hand or an ear.

Have a happy, healthy, and prosperous 2023! You deserve it!



Deanna Picon is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC, which provides comprehensive support programs and seminars for parents of special needs children. Her personal mission is to empower parents as they advocate for their children while balancing productive work and family lives.

As the parent of a non-verbal young man with autism, Deanna personally understands the impact of autism on a family. She knows first-hand how heartbreaking a diagnosis of autism can be for parents and the personal struggles that often follow. But, through her own journey with autism, Deanna also recognizes the special joys, rewarding experiences, and unique life gifts which can result from raising a child with special needs.

Deanna's articles have appeared in Exceptional Needs Today magazine, Autism Parenting Magazine, Exceptional Parent Magazine, and Parenting Special Needs Magazine. She is the recipient of both the 2018 "Top Parental Advice Writer Award" and 2015 "Top Life Coach Writer Award" from Autism Parenting Magazine. Her academic credits include a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Broadcast Journalism from Syracuse University.

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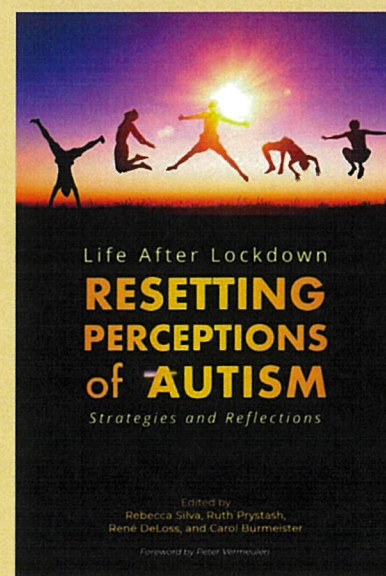
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LIFE AFTER LOCKDOWN

A powerful resource for people with autism, as well as those who are neurotypical, in dealing with the stress and anxiety of social situations, going back into the community, and returning to school and work.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0B37KWZNC/ref=tmm_pap_swat_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1654896233&sr=8-1



Contributions from 40 well-known experts and autistic individuals including:

Dr. Temple Grandin
Dr. Tony Attwood
Dr. Stephen Shore

Dr. Kerry Magro
Dr. Jâcqueline Fede
Dr. Amy Laurent

Dr. Peter Vermeulen
Larry Biassonnette
Elizabeth Sautter

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