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Child

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR TODAY'S PARENTS

KIDS' HEALTH REPORT
Alternative Solutions for
Colds, Pain, and More

Special Series

A Balanced Life

by

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nurture yourself

Taking care of your own needs makes it
Here, 12 ways for super-busy moms

This is the first in a three-part series on what it takes to achieve balance in your life now that you're a mother. This month: paying attention to your own needs so that you can better handle your family's needs. Next month: nurturing your marriage.



IT KIND OF CREEPS UP ON YOU.

One day you're a brand-new mother, totally lost in the beauty of your baby's face. Then as your family grows, so does your love—and your "to do" list. Everyone needs Mommy to give a hug, tie a shoelace, make dinner. "There just aren't enough hours in the day," says Sally Rivero of Vero Beach, Florida, mother of a 5-year-old daughter and an 8-year-old son who has cerebral palsy and requires endless rounds of physical, occupational, and speech therapy.

Fortunately, Rivero is savvy enough to know that if she wants to keep going for her family's sake, she needs some refreshing downtime for her own sake. So she gives herself a pep talk.

"I say to myself, 'Take oxygen first.'

The payoff when you treat yourself right? An overall sense of well-being.

That's what they tell parents traveling with their kids on airplanes!"

All moms need that same kind of "oxygen," according to Karen Zager, Ph.D., a psychologist in Manhattan and Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, whose clients include many busy mothers. "Getting even 15 minutes to call your own each day can make all the difference in reducing your stress level," Dr. Zager points out.

What's Stopping You?

To get the breathing room you need, it helps to know what's standing in your way. If you're like a lot of other moms, you're so in love with your kids that you tend to think of them and their needs first. "Sometimes, moms don't eat when they're hungry or sleep when they're tired," says Halcyone H. Bohlen, Ph.D., a psychologist in Washington, DC. "They have unconsciously learned to ignore their own needs while taking care of everybody else in the family."

Our culture's strong work ethic is another contributing factor. "We're always

on the go because society tells us that being busy is a virtue," says Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D., the Woodstock, New York-based author of *Time Shifting: Creating More Time to Enjoy Your Life*. The sad result, he adds, is that we're loath to loaf—or even to daydream.

Furthermore, some of us get so accustomed to being on "automatic pilot," shifting from one family chore to another, that we're actually a bit uneasy when we find ourselves alone and with nothing to do. So we continue to ignore our own needs even then, by filling up those rare free moments with *more* family work like folding laundry and paying bills.

But can you really afford the consequences? "When you ignore your own needs, you become exhausted and irritable with those you love," says Dr. Zager. "You feel disconnected, and even resentful, because you are constantly in a state

easier to take good care of your kids.
to catch up with themselves. BY MELINDA BLAU

of overload," adds Dr. Rechtschaffen.

Making yourself a priority, on the other hand, leads to a healthier *you*, experts say. And when you focus on yourself, "you set a better example for your children, plus you're better able to take care of important things in your own life, such as personal interests and friendships," says Yolanda Bruce Brooks, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in Dallas.

"I used to think it was silly to take an hour for myself, whether it was to go to the hairdresser or to read the paper," admits Lisa Marsh Ryerson, mother

of three daughters, ages 10, 7, and 1, and the president of Wells College in Aurora, New York. "But I've found that balance in life depends on my remembering that I'm a better parent and a better administrator if I have downtime of my own."

The 12-Point Plan

If you are like many mothers of small children, you've all but stopped doing solitary things such as taking a leisurely bath or reading a book. "You may need to practice being alone," Dr. Rechtschaffen observes. But if other super-busy women can learn to catch up with themselves, so can you. Here is a 12-point, mom-tested plan to help you on your way.

1. Listen to your mind/body signals. This involves letting your own needs—for food, rest, solitude—be your guide. For example, if you've been feeling exhausted lately, do grab a nap at the first opportunity. But also plan on going to bed earlier at least two nights each week. That could get at the root of your tiredness instead of just staving it off temporarily. The key to success, adds Dr. Bohlen, is to go by your own body clock, "not by what others think or expect of you."

2. Learn to recognize physical signs of overload. These may include a rapid pulse, a pounding heart, shallow breathing, clammy palms, an upset stomach, or a headache that won't quit. Look for psychological

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Getting even 15 minutes to yourself each day

symptoms, too, like anger, irritability, or screaming and yelling. "I used to go until I was ready to drop, and then I'd be impatient and have a hard time listening to my kids, let alone responding thoughtfully," admits Mary Ryan Amato, a Chicago mother of three. "Now when I feel tense or impatient, I recognize the tell-tale signs and start to slow down."

3. Find small, quick ways to ventilate. When you're having a frustrating day on the home front, try pounding a pillow while forcefully exhaling to get the anger out. Or after your spouse gets home, hand over the baby and head out for a brisk walk or even a solo drive with the radio blasting, if you find that refreshing. Or maybe the phone is your favorite restorative vehicle. For Rivero, whose residence in Florida means she's far removed from extended family members, "a huge gift to myself is chatting long distance with my older sister, who lives in New York." Even a quick breather is better than none, according to Dr. Brooks.

4. Use writing to gain insights about yourself. Think, too, of ways you can prevent stress. Barbara Biziou, a personal-

development counselor in New York City, recommends an exercise for getting in touch with your own needs. First, take pen and paper behind a closed door or into a quiet corner. (A lighted candle and fragrant flower can help to make it feel like a place of your own.) Then, write down these three headings: *I need...*, *I want...*, and *I feel...* As you look at the headings, think about your favorite things to do, as well as what's been missing in your life lately. When her son Jourdan was 3, Biziou realized she lacked time alone and wanted to develop a skill. "I enrolled in a 10-week photography course," she reports, "and, naturally, Jourdan turned out to be my favorite subject."

5. Pamper yourself every day. "You don't have to spend a lot of money to do it," Biziou points out. She suggests scenting your shower or bath with rose or juniper to counteract stress; lavender or chamomile to feel relaxed; and lemon, orange, or geranium for instant refreshment. Other quick pick-me-ups include sipping pure springwater instead of H₂O from the tap, and tuning in to the happy

sounds of a wind chime that you've dangled in an entryway.

6. Make privacy a priority. You can start explaining the idea of privacy to a child as young as 3, and there's nothing selfish about doing so, according to Jacqueline Hornor Plumez, Ph.D., a Larchmont, New York-based psychologist. "Besides giving *you* some separate time and space, a sense of privacy gives your child permission to declare his own private moments," says Dr. Plumez. "That's a positive step toward independence, and it's a great skill to acquire."

Rivero has worked her way up to a luxurious 45 minutes alone in her bedroom almost every day, which she takes while her sitter is at the house or after her husband comes home from work. "I tell the kids, 'I'm going into my room for a little while,' and they know just what that means," she notes. "I might read—or I might just sit there and do nothing."

7. Find sneaky ways to steal bits of time. One way is to get up before everyone else. "I'm first into the kitchen in the morning, and that way I can sometimes get an extra half hour to sip my coffee and

BENEFITS FOR YOUR FAMILY WHEN YOU TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF

Your husband gets a chance to be a hands-on dad, and that's good for him personally. Involved dads have fewer stress-related health problems and a built-in buffer—their family—when things go wrong at work, many research studies have shown.

Your children get a great role model for nurturing themselves and for heeding their own needs. Siblings get more chances to help and teach each other, too.

Your marriage improves because your frustrations are vented and you bring a fresher perspective to each new challenge in your relationship.

Your extended family grows as you reach out more often to relatives, neighbors, friends, other parents, exercise pals, and maybe a free-time buddy, too.

Everyone feels better because family emotions are contagious. When you're contented, your loved ones fall into sync with your calm, happy rhythms.



take oxygen

can help you stay revved up and ready to go.

read the paper," says Ryerson. Another trick she discovered, quite by accident, is relaxing in her car when she's early for an appointment. "Two or three years ago, I happened to arrive 15 minutes early for a speech I had to give. So I pushed the driver's seat way back and read a magazine I had in the car," she recalls. "Ever since then, I've made sure I get to places early!"

8. Exercise. A 40-minute walk is a better stress reliever than a 20-minute nap, according to research cited by the National Recreation & Park Association in Arlington, Virginia. And don't forget that with exercise, you kill two birds with one stone: You get time for yourself and fitness, too (the surgeon general recommends 30 minutes of exercise daily). "We sweat, gossip, exchange book lists, and generally have a good time," says San Francisco mom Susan Frankel of the exercise class she attends three mornings a week after dropping off her 4-year-old daughter, Zoe, at preschool. As a result, Frankel adds, "I sleep better at night, have more energy, and am more patient with Zoe, too." So find a form of exercise you like enough to do regularly, counsels Dr. Brooks—and don't make the mistake of thinking that running after a toddler qualifies!

9. Escape. "Mothers give of themselves whenever someone needs assistance, but when it comes to their own needs, they don't ask for help," observes Dr. Brooks. She urges moms to occasionally get a relative, friend, or church or synagogue member to cover the home front for a few hours, for a day, or—even better—overnight. (If you would like to be able to return the favor, you can arrange a sleepover for your kids with another family, then take a turn doing the same thing for the other mom so she gets a night off, too.) "It's the concept of having no responsibility and doing anything you want that is so refreshing," Biziou explains.



It doesn't take much: A few minutes with the paper can help you put on the brakes and feel more in balance.

DOES YOUR HUSBAND SUPPORT YOU?

If it sometimes feels as if your spouse is not being supportive enough in helping you claim some time for yourself, here's what to do:

First, try to approach him with a neutral, rather than negative, attitude. It doesn't help to focus on what your partner isn't doing to improve your situation.

Second, instead of harping, be clear, calm, and specific as you talk about your needs. But don't stop there. Be sure to ask your husband to talk to you about *his* needs, too.

Third, work as a team to figure out ways you *both* can get your fair share of free time. Besides "making deals" to cover for each other, you can get help from relatives or paid babysitters, or by swapping child-care stints with other parents.

10. Join a group. Though it doesn't sound like time alone, joining a group certainly gives you time for yourself, says Elizabeth Stirling, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "The real benefit is that it helps you forge relationships outside your family at a time when you may be feeling isolated, particularly if you're a new mother," she explains. Of her Monday night book club, Rivero says, "I think the book is just an excuse for great conversation among women. It always starts my week off right." If you don't know of a group you'd like to join in your community, you can try launching a brand-new one with a few friends.

11. Enlist a "time buddy." Another good way to make sure you get time for yourself is to ask just one other person to back you up by joining you. (Ideally, she's been wanting to find a supportive buddy, too.) You might meet on the same

day each week to monitor each other's downtime and trade suggestions about getting rejuvenated. Choosing an out-of-home meeting place, such as the coffee bar at the local bookstore, will assure that you use the time together having fun, not wasting any precious moments by tidying up for each other.

12. Make the most of the time you have. Despite doing everything you can to balance your life, you still might feel that there aren't enough hours in the day. Sometimes, you'll feel rushed even during your freer moments. But by using your senses to observe and savor the colors, shapes, and sounds around you, you can maximize the benefits of the time you *do* have, according to Patricia Hudson, Ph.D., a psychologist in Dallas. "Life is in the details," she says. "Don't forget to enjoy them!" ■

Contributing editor Melinda Blau of Northampton, Massachusetts, often reports on new family trends.