

10 FREE Gifts Parents of Kids with Special Needs Should Give Themselves

Caregiving is a round-the-clock job with few breaks. Caregivers have a tendency to put most of their energy into another person's well-being, while their own needs take second place...or third or fourth. But there are many gifts that caregivers can give to themselves to help sustain that energy. Fortunately, the most meaningful gifts usually don't cost a dime. Here are 10 gifts that every caregiver could use:

Health assessment

Studies have documented that caregivers suffer from poor health and stress-related conditions. Before scheduling a check-up with your physician, complete a free online health assessment to identify areas of concern.

Nutrition

I know parents who are vigilant about their children's nutritional intake but negligent with their own. Consider keeping a food diary like this one at Nutr diary.com to keep track of nutritional choices.

Reading for insight

When I take my kids to the public library, I often check out a book of poetry for myself – Shakespeare, Petrarch, traditional Japanese haiku, ee cummings, Goethe, Hesiod, whatever looks interesting. Poetry has the advantages of a short time commitment and multiple levels of meaning, so that each reading gives a different impression. I find that the words stay with me and give me insight during trying moments. Barbara Crooker is one modern poet who also happens to be a parent of an adult with a disability, and her parenting experiences surface in her writing.

Friendship

Social isolation is the single biggest risk of caregiving, and friendship is one of the "cures." Friendship with other adults can be difficult to navigate at times, but sharing good times can increase an overall sense of well-being.

Exercise Outdoors

Regular exercise reduces stress, improves cardiovascular health and boosts cognitive function. There are many ways to incorporate exercise into a caregiving lifestyle:

- Call your city's Parks and Rec department to find out where the wheelchair accessible walking trails are, and plan out a daily walk with your loved one.
- I used to take walks with my son in a backpack carrier until he was over 40 pounds.
- Get a bike trailer and go for a ride.
- Put in an exercise video at home or do a 10 minute stretch in the living room.
- Dance.

Quiet time

Some people lock themselves in the bathroom to get a few minutes of quiet time, others go for a short walk. Just stopping, relaxing, and looking out of a window for a full minute can serve as a much-needed quiet break.

Creativity

A creative outlet such as sewing, painting, journaling, scrapbooking or making music reduces stress and offers a sense of accomplishment. Last year the Friendship Circle hosted an evening of painting for mothers of children with special needs, which was successful in terms of both friendship and creativity. The opportunity for creative expression can help us to see things from a fresh perspective.

Laughter

Laughing several times per day is a fun way to reduce stress and blood pressure. When my son is feeling stressed, I usually show him a few photos from the DogShaming.com, which guarantees that he'll laugh so hard that he'll roll right over. My husband likes to re-watch the 1980 movie "Airplane!" – a movie so deliberately bad that it makes almost everyone laugh.

Beauty

Beauty is all around us, but we ignore it most of the time. One night around 2:30am, my son woke up screaming, so I scooped him out of bed and ran out of the house with him before he could wake up everyone else. Outside, the sky was unusually clear, and we could see the Milky Way, hundreds of stars and even a lunar rainbow.

I carried my son around the block until he was calm and sleepy. The only thing he remembers about that night is the lunar rainbow, and we saw it because of his frequent night-waking. Whether it's a walk in the woods, a visit to an art museum, digging in the garden or an outdoor choir concert, beauty does have a therapeutic effect. But we have to open our eyes to it first.

Forgiveness

Caregivers, especially parents of children with special needs, often blame themselves and question their own good judgment at every crisis. Sometimes we also carry a grudge against a person who hurt us in the past, either intentionally or unintentionally. Carrying a sense of guilt and resentment over a long period can diminish quality of life for the whole family. The choice to forgive ourselves and others is the best gift of all.

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<https://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2014/10/02/10-free-gifts-parents-of-kids-with-special-needs-should-give-themselves/>