

Guest Speaker – **Frossa Mrakas** – Qualified social worker, specialising in the Autism and Aspergers field, also has a 12 year on the spectrum. She spoke to us about **“How Stress Affects parents”**

Frossa first asked how many people were stressed; many people indicated they were.

Some reasons why parents are stressed:

- Difficulties getting services for children over 10, for example, respite
- Difficulties getting funding if a child is not fully autistic
- After age 13 funding is reduced
- Difficulties facing secondary school, such as social issues, big changes, etc
- Frossa explained there are “different schools for different kids”
- Frossa indicated the need for parents to look after themselves and consider counselling
- Parents often feel disenfranchised and carry a lot of grief (specially after diagnosis)
- Parents of children with ASD have higher stress levels than other parents

Frossa recommended to:

- Be with or find people who are supportive of you
- To concentrate on one issues at a time
- When looking for a professional, find someone with ASD experience
- The professional must have a plan to work with you
- Ask professional what services they have for children with ASD
- Let the professional know the issues affecting, such as school, siblings etc.

Frossa gave examples of *Internal Stress* – They are:

- Your attitude
- Your assumptions
- Your expectations
- Your perceptions
- Your negative believes

Points to remember:

- If something hasn't worked, ask yourself what went wrong, and remember to have a plan/be prepared for a next time
- Be kind to yourself
- Be realistic of what you can do or give to your child
- Beliefs such as “the success of my child depends on me!” “If I deny my own needs for him/her . . .” will create a rod for yourself
- We don't always have to have approval from our child
- Children with special needs, need boundaries too
- See the positive side of stress, laugh at it!
- Use anger constructively
- Ask yourself – how did I use that situation?
- Remember the child will copy you, you are the role model
- Develop support systems - good friends, family
- You owe it to your family to look after yourself

Problem Solving Skills:

- Time Management
- Make a time pie for yourself
- Goal setting - what can I do, what can't I do
- Seek help
- Get an autism card - use it
- Deal with the school, it is essential

Examples of *External Stress*:

- School
- Financial pressures
- Work issues
- Partner issues or ex-husband issues

Solutions: - plan this way:

- State the problem
- How it can be best dealt with? - brain storm it
- Face your stresses – avoidance makes them greater
- Don't make it as "teaching to swim when drowning"
- Prepare and plan
- Anticipate, coach yourself
- Ask yourself, who is talking? *the internal critic or the positive coach?*
- Practice (so it works) and visualise the situation
- Things are neither good or bad, but thinking about it makes it one way or another
- Let go of expectations of being a good parent
- Find a support group (this meeting!) and /or a relaxation group
- Learn to relax, even for 5 minutes! Remember to take deep breaths
- Lock skills in your head, to use when you need them
- Teach your kids "you are not the behaviour" "the behaviour you did is ..." "I love you but what you did is not..."
- Asperger kids see themselves as less competent which adds to the anxiety
- Identify possible stressful situations and plan, you also know when you are about to get into a stressful situation, use your skills
- Remember - if you are relaxed you are not stressed, they are not compatible!
- Learn to identify your stressors (pick 1 or 2) work on them
- Have a thought diary and a positive affirmation to repeat to yourself
- Use your inner coach - decrease the inner critic. Make the person/situation smaller & smaller (or naked)
- Use nerves as energy
- Take one step at a time

Frossa also wrote on the board a chart showing:

1. the event/situation
2. the thought
3. how you are feeling and
4. how it affects you

The result showed how negative thoughts create stress and chip away at you.

Frossa Mrakas, qualified social worker and professional counsellor, offers stress management programs for parents and carers of children with an autism spectrum disorder. She can be reached on 0418 174545 or frossamrakas@hotmail.com