

DR. DARREN SUSH: Hello, and welcome to Holly's Huddle, a podcast series created to help people at every stage in the autism journey. My name is Dr. Darren Sush, Head of Autism and Psychology here at Cigna, and I will be joined every session by actress, activist, and mother of a thriving autistic son, Holly Robinson Peete. Today, we'll be joined by another dynamic mother, Michelle Hobgood.

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: Hi, thanks, so happy to be here.

DR. DARREN SUSH: Michelle, thank you so much for joining us today, we really appreciate it. And we wondered, can you share a little bit about your son's journey with autism?

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: My son, his name is Davon, he's 26-years-old, he's non-verbal, and he was born prematurely, one month prematurely, and actually diagnosed with autism at 1-year-old. He also has cerebral palsy and microcephalia. And he -- the number one thing that people realize when they first see him, is that he does not look his age at all. He's 26 and he's just about 4-feet tall. Everyone always thinks he's much younger than his age. I'm really excited to just share his life. One of the things that means so much to me, is just celebrating who he is, and not his diagnosis.

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: I've gotten to know him through your social media, and I have to tell you, it's -- I feel like I know him. I feel like he's somebody in my life. And I think the love that he has in him comes through, and the way you talk with him, and the way you you mother. I think something that I -- I really wanted folks to hear and share is how you balance. And we all know perfect balance is not a real thing, right? But how do you balance your caretaking versus work, you know, self-care? What are some of the tips that you use?

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: Well, I will say that the number one thing is keeping a schedule. Sometimes I have to wing it, but really sitting down every night and just kind of looking at the following day and seeing what is on my plate for work regarding my son, regarding my own personal care, that's the number one thing. The second thing is, is once you have that schedule, I make sure to do my absolute best to stick to it. And sometimes that means having to say "no" to people. Having to say "no" to my son. Having to say "no" to my husband. Having to say "no" to a potential client. I -- I'm really a real stickler for looking at my schedule and assessing what's on my plate before saying "yes" to anything. And I think that that's really important, whether you're a parent or not. Just knowing that this is what I have to do and if you can't do anymore, be strong enough to say "no." Or -- you know, one of the main things that I also do, is I -- I always ask and say, "When do you need that by?" Because a lot of times, the -- we might internalize that the person needs it right then and there, when they could probably need it two weeks from now or three weeks from now, or a month from now. So that's one of the things that's really helped me, but number one, being comfortable saying "no."

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: Michelle, I'm so glad you didn't say "no" to us, Michelle. We made the cut.

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: I don't say "no" to you, Holly.

DR. DARREN SUSH: Things have -- things have changed so much now, obviously, we are in the midst of the COVID pandemic, and you know, we're not able to access the resources that we

once were, we are not able to do the things that we once maybe found enjoyable or used for self-care. Has anything changed for you and your family? And do you have any thoughts of, you know, other families who might be going through the same thing of -- of how they might manage?

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: Well, a lot has changed, specifically for me. In regard to self-care, one of my -- and you guys out there, do not judge me for my self-care, but one of the things that I absolutely love to do, before the pandemic, was go to the movies completely alone. Not with my husband, not with a friend, not with my son, just by myself. I would go to the theater, \I would sneak in some food in my purse, and I would just escape into someone else's story. And I've always loved to do that, since I was like, a kid. Well, a teenager, when I could go to the movies alone. And that was my self-care, at least three or four times a month, I would get my purse and I'd say, "Peace out, hubby, see you guys later!" And I would get on the train and head to the movie theater. And now that's not happening. the number one thing that I loved to do was that and also traveling, and I'm not able to do that anymore. So I've had to kind of readjust and what I do now is I will have, like, a single movie night at home. So that's something that I really encourage parents to do, is still try to find whatever your self-care is. Whatever that -- whatever makes you feel better. Even if it's just five or ten minutes of that one thing, try to definitely make time for that, no matter what it is.

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: I wanted to -- to add that one -- one thing that I love about what you do with your platform on social media, is that you shared Davon's story in such a compassion way, but it's also extremely informative, because we watched him get vaccinated.

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: Yes.

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: I can imagine what the feedback was, this is what I love about you, Michelle, is that you're so straight forward, right, in some of your, you know, captions, and you're just like, this is what I'm doing. If you have judgement on it, you can take it someplace else.

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: Right.

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: Because this is what works for me and my family. And -- and I just really found watching the kids' journey, getting the vaccine, and the doctor coming over, and what the doctor had to say, that was some unbelievable content. Really, super helpful, I found. And so, I -- I just want you to know, I don't know if you consciously do it, but the way you share is so helpful to other parents and other families. Do you ever have any regrets to -- of oversharing, or under sharing, or -- what are your thoughts when I say to you that I really love the way that you share?

MICHELLE HOBGOOD: My son is 26 years old, so I've been doing this autism thing a long time. When there was no Facebook, no internet, like, it was just a desert land. And initially, I wasn't always comfortable with sharing things. And even when I started being on social media, I was very guarded with my life. I didn't actually start sharing my son until probably about maybe three or four years ago, and I did like a birthday video. I was singing happy birthday to him. And it ended up on Autism Speaks, and I saw there was 30,000 likes, and I was just blown away, like, wow, there's a whole community of people out here that want to see this kind of

content, that want to connect with other parents. So ever since that time, I've just been sharing more and more. After I would get messages from parents, I started to really realize that other parents needed that. They needed to see themselves reflected out there, just in the world, wherever it was.

So the vaccination thing, I knew that there were going to be some people that weren't comfortable with that, just in general. Outside of autism, it's a very touchy subject. But my son will not wear a mask. He will not keep a mask on his face. And the pandemic has been an absolute nightmare for us in that regard, because we cannot take him anywhere.

I knew that once a vaccination became available, that he was going to get one, because I'm weighing what's better for him, versus the outcome of potentially getting COVID. So when my son's doctor, who was a wonderful man, who you saw on my IG page, called and said he has 10 doses of the vaccination, would we like to have my son vaccinated? We said, of course. Because even when it's time for him to be vaccinated, we would have to have him wear a mask, go out to this vaccination center, wherever it is here in New York City, stand on a very long line, and just wait our turn. And then have to go through all of the other people that are wondering why my son doesn't have a mask on while we're waiting. So do you see the spiral that just goes on?

So when this opportunity came, my husband and I, we literally just cried. We were just so excited that not only are we getting the vaccination, but we're going to get it in our home. We are going to get it with a doctor that's been my son's caretaker for 10 years. With a doctor that has specifically dealt with the special needs population here in New York City, and is compassionate and caring.

DR. DARREN SUSH: Well, Holly, I think one of the things that you've really managed to amazingly do with, you know, putting yourself out there and sharing your story and your family's story through social media and just kind of presenting yourself, is -- is kind of creating a community where one really needed to exist. And creating those resources for -- for people who really need to access some answers or some support, or know somebody is there, going through something. Maybe not exactly the same, but similar. And, you know, thinking about COVID, and thinking about quarantines, and thinking about everyone being kind of so distant, the way in which you've done that has really kind of circumvented all these challenges and helped people to connect. Maybe this question for Holly too, and for Michelle, how have you kind of connected with your resources, and what advice, beyond, you know, social media strategies, would you -- would you suggest for families who really need to tap into their resources or looking for that additional support?

HOLLY ROBINSON-PEETE: Well, I'll start. I just -- I think now, because of our limitations socially, that social media used for good can be very good. And that's what I think -- that's what I think Michelle saw with the reaction of her journey and the vaccine, with Davon. I think social media is so good at, in connecting like-minded people who are experiencing different journeys and different layers, and drama in their lives. And if you find people who understand what you're going through, sometimes that's all it takes, just someone who gets what you're experiencing. I have a very strong network of moms in my life. And that helps me navigate so many issues. Michelle doesn't know it, but she's -- the newest member of my network I've been so touched moved and inspired by her journey. One of the reasons why I wanted to do a reality project about our journey, is because I wanted to share the story of what it looks like when a

family rallies around a kid with autism. What does that look like? And what are those issues? And sharing his journey has been such a blessing. When I think back to 20 years ago when he was diagnosed, somebody said, "Oh, Holly, you know what? In 15 years, you're going to have a reality show called "Meet the Peetes" and RJ and -- you are going to show RJ trying to get his driver's license." I would be like, what? No way. I can barely move. I was frozen in place, just trying to advocate. Just trying to get him to all his therapies, and just figure out was he going to be verbal? If he wasn't. What was he going to do in life? And so the sharing piece and the networking has gotten me through everything. Some of the people that we've been fortunate enough to have on this podcast series have been the lighthouses in my life. Because when things looked really sad and really unbearable or insurmountable, I would listen, or talk to, or be in a autism mom text string, I've got a text string formeverything. And so -- you know, that's why I was so excited that Michelle came on, because you are an influencer, and we throw that word around, but when it comes to our community, and the communities that are impacted by the things that your son is impacted by, you know, you didn't wake up the same day that, you know, your son was born and be like, okay, now I'm going to do a podcast. Like, there's a long period of time of processing this journey, before you're able to connect and share. And by that time, you've lived it. You're a little thicker skinned, it's easier for you to trust yourself. You don't care if somebody's little feelings get hurt, they can keep it moving. And I think that's so helpful for those who are just getting the diagnosis today, to see that strength. And that's what I see in you, Michelle. That's what I see in you as an advocate and as a mom.

**MICHELLE HOBGOOD:** Thank you. So, as far as support, I know that one of the main focuses for me actually has been social media. I have a couple of friends, a couple of mom friends in here that I can connect with. Two other women who actually have, you know, kids that are close to my son's age, and just slightly younger. And we talk personally, but I'm always so busy with work, that I have to say that I'm guilty of seeking out, full-on support, physical support. I don't belong to a support group, and actually never did. I never had that physical community. My community is actually on social media. When I am feeling very sad or something is stressing me out, the situation with the mask, the situation with my -- taking my son to the podiatrist a couple of weeks ago, and having to do this whole dance with the doctor with him not wearing a mask, and what have you. I went to social media and I shared that, and that's where I actually find the comfort. so I don't have the support in the physical sense of the word, but it's basically more of a virtual community, and I'm actually really happy for that. Outside of that, my son has a home health aide, so she comes every day and she's here to help with him. My husband and I, we take turns doing things. Before the pandemic hit, my mom was just a huge part of just helping with everything with my son. And my husband and I would travel, he would stay with her. My son would go to a camp and my mom would pick him up while we were coming back from vacation since the pandemic, we haven't been able to see her. We've been very, very careful, because we want her to stay safe and want to keep our son safe. So it's been very tricky. So I find support for my family from social media, from friends, and I feel like you have to just have a mix of it. You know, whatever works for you. Even if it's just emailing some -- DMing someone. I have lots of moms that just DM me and they ask me random questions. Anything from potty training to when I was a single parent. And I -- I'll message them back and I'm sending them a dissertation. And sometimes, they respond back, wow, thank you. Thank you so much for sharing. And -- and that's my way of supporting.

**DR. DARREN SUSH:** You know, one of the things that this makes me think of, in thinking about balancing life and self-care and taking care of yourself while you're taking care of

someone else, is -- is -- is finding what's going to work. And -- and -- I -- I hear that a lot in what -- in what you're saying is, this might not be ideal, but we can make this the deal. So I can't go to the movies by myself, but I can go and I could watch a movie by myself, or my son is not able to, you know, at this point, he's not going to put on a mask, but we could figure out, you know, this work around and fortunately we have the doctor who's willing to support us in that. You know, maybe, I like to go -- you know, obviously going and getting the support from your mother, but, you know, finding a way to still connect with her, whether it be, you know, Zooms or Facetimes or whatever it's gonna be. So, you know, thinking about that balance and that taking care of yourself, you don't have to wait to do that until it's going to be the perfect scenario, because I think we found, you know, in -- in -- in raising kids and also just with -- with COVID and the pandemic, that ideal scenario is going to -- going to take a long time if it even comes. So thank you so much for sharing your story and providing the support and the advice that you do. And thank you again, Michelle, and thank you, Holly, and of course, thank you to our listeners and please be sure to check out our next podcast in the series, where we will be talking about transitioning to adulthood on the spectrum.