

# Family Stress and Coping

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**Everyone experiences life's ups and downs. But sometimes we get hit with challenges that really test our ability to handle life. This guide discusses how stress impacts the entire family and provides ideas on how to better handle challenging times.**



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## ALL FAMILIES EXPERIENCE PERIODS OF STRESS

and challenging times. Evan and Jennifer have two children and own a modest home. They both work and while living month-to-month, they make ends meet and are able to enjoy life. Recently, Jennifer has had to miss work as their 10-year-old son is having some behavioral problems and she takes him weekly to a specialist. This has decreased her work hours and thus her paycheck. At the same time, Evan's parents who are in their late 70s, have been needing more help around the house. Evan is spending several evenings a week helping them and is unable to get chores done around his own house. Sara, their 7-year-old daughter, is feeling left out and neglected due to the stressors the family is experiencing. Everyone in the family is feeling the tension; however, Evan and Jennifer have a strong marriage and know that they will get through this stressful time.

Everyone experiences life's ups and downs. But, sometimes we get hit with challenges that really test our ability to handle life. This guide will discuss how stress impacts the entire family and provide ideas on how to better handle these challenging times.

Stress is the body's reaction to the changing demands of life. It is a part of life for everyone and moderate amounts of stress can be good! Stress motivates us to get things done. Stress is caused by a variety of factors. Daily hassles in life – such as getting a parking or speeding ticket, having a bad day at work, or staying up all night with a sick child – all cause stress.

Major life events can be stressful whether it's a happy event (such as graduations, weddings, or getting a new job) or a negative event (such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or a severe accident). They can all cause a significant amount of stress, especially when combined with the everyday stressors we may be experiencing.

Children also experience stress. In young children, signs of stress may include whining or crying more often, having temper tantrums, regressing to earlier behaviors, and/or needing more attention from caring adults. Older children may experience symptoms such as a drop in grades, arguing more with siblings/parents, becoming angry more easily, or withdrawing from friends and family.

## HOW YOUR BODY TELLS YOU ABOUT STRESS

While everyone may experience various signs of stress from time to time, if they continue to occur, think about what might be going on in your life. Symptoms may include:

- Feeling tired all the time
- Losing your temper
- Being forgetful
- Laughing or crying for no reason
- Experiencing frequent physical illnesses
- Withdrawal
- Muscle tension
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Inability to concentrate
- Experiencing marital/relationship problems
- Feeling anxious
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Tension headaches
- Sweaty palms
- Increased alcohol, tobacco, or drug use

## **Stress affects the entire family**

Think about the family as a mobile that hangs over an infant's crib. If we touch one part of the mobile, then the rest of it moves. The same thing occurs with stress.

If one family member is experiencing stress, the others will be affected as well. We may think we are hiding our stress; however, other family members can sense it. Sara is sensing the family stress and responding by feeling neglected. Spouses may become short with one another or argue more due to stress. Being aware of how stress is affecting each family member individually and the family as a whole, is important.

## **How families process stress**

Having an understanding of what happens in the process of stress may help you and your family manage stress in a more efficient and positive way.

First, there is the event or situation, called a stressor, which can throw us off balance as in the metaphor of the baby's mobile. When one part of the mobile starts moving, the rest moves too. Until we change to meet the demands of the new event or situation, we will feel stressed. Sometimes this is easy, such as reorganizing your day or week. Other times we can't adjust as easily. The events or situations come too rapidly, or we don't have the resources to deal with them appropriately. The stressors pile up and what we experience is an accumulation of stress.

Take for example, a job loss. With this loss in income, the family may get behind on their mortgage payment. Both parents may now need to work outside the home, or one parent may need to pick up another job. Perhaps the children may not get to participate in some activities they typically do because of the extra cost. All of these stressors begin to pile up

Combine this with the daily stressors we all face, and the stress becomes more intense. Multiple stressors can cause us to act uncharacteristically and perhaps blow up over a seemingly small problem. The small problem isn't the issue. The problem is the cumulative effect of all of the stressors.

Evan and Jennifer are experiencing a temporary reduction in income due to Jennifer taking time off to take their son to a specialist for his behavioral problems. This temporary reduction in income adds to their stressors. During this time they are also trying to find help for Evan's aging parents. Added to this list of stressors is that their daughter is feeling left out and neglected. If Evan and Jennifer don't take time to address the stressors, they will experience the cumulative effects.

## **Much depends on your point of view**

The second part of the stress process is our perception of the event or situation and how we believe we can get through it. Families and individuals handle stressful events differently.

Some people seem to take things in stride and don't get upset when faced with challenges. Others become very tense and are unable to effectively deal with the problem.

Some families pull together to face stressful situations, while members of other families distance themselves from one another.

How we perceive a stressor impacts our success in overcoming it. Those who believe they can manage, eliminate, or modify the stressor usually handle stress better. Those who see the stressor as an opportunity for growth also handle stress much better. Evan and Jennifer's strong marriage and attitude that they will get through this stressful time are helpful in maintaining a positive outlook.

## **Tools to cope with stress**

The next part of the stress process is how we react and adapt. We rely on our existing resources to get through tough times. For example, if it is a financial crisis, we may draw upon a savings account. Family members may rely on their faith or spirituality to help them through the stressful time. Drawing upon our existing resources may eliminate or reduce stress. Some resources include:

- Time
- Money
- Insurance
- Skills and hobbies, such as budgeting or carpentry
- Previous experience
- Education
- Family, friends, and community support

If our existing resources aren't enough, we may need to find new resources to help. For example, parents may need to take on additional jobs to make financial ends meet. Accepting help from the local food bank or energy assistance program may be a short-term resource.

Evan and Jennifer might ask a neighbor to take the children for an evening to give Evan and Jennifer some time alone for a "date night." They might also examine their budget to see where they could cut spending while Jennifer needs to take time off of work. They may want to explore community resources for seniors to help Evan's parents so that he is not spending so much time away from home in the evenings.

As a family works through a severe challenge, changes need to take place within the family. How well a family can adapt to change depends on the individuals and the family as a whole. We can actually become stronger as the result of dealing with significant challenges together.

## Managing Individual Stress

The first place to start managing stress is with yourself. In order to assist others, you need to be healthy and able to handle situations in a positive manner. Here are some ideas that may assist you in managing your own stress.

**Be realistic** – When feeling overwhelmed don't try to do too much. Can you ask someone to help you with tasks, such as asking a friend to pick up your child after school?

**Focus on one thing at a time** – Make a list of what needs to get done. Prioritize the list and focus on one task at a time. Use this list to help delegate tasks to other people.

**Exercise** – Research finds that physical exercise can help in reducing stress. Walk the dog or go on a hike.

**Hobbies** – Take a break and do something you enjoy. Read a book, work on a car, play music, or look at family photo albums from a great vacation.

**Laugh** – Have a sense of humor. Find time to have fun and laugh with friends and family. Watch a funny television show or movie. Take a break from taking things too seriously.

**Visualize** – Think about how you might handle the situation more successfully. Ask a friend for ideas if you are not sure of how to do something differently.

**Maintain a healthy lifestyle** – Try to have a balance of work and fun. Eat well, cut down on caffeine and high sugar foods, and avoid alcohol and drugs. A balanced diet is more important than ever during stressful times. Get enough sleep.

**Journal** – Consider journaling each day. Sometimes our brains are so full of what needs to be done, how we are feeling about a situation, or fear of not remembering what we need to do, that we become overwhelmed. Journaling can be helpful to express our emotions and keep track of what needs to be done.

**Help Others** – Do something nice for someone else. Visit with an elderly neighbor who lives alone. Sometimes our problems become more manageable when we see others in need. Doing something for another person can help improve our mood.

**Use moderation** – Think about what your weekly schedule is like. Do you have too many activities? Build in some time to relax.

**Talk to others** – When you are concerned about something, talk it over with trusted friends or family members. Talking about a concern often helps it seem like less of a problem.

## Recognizing stress and getting the help you need

Experiencing stress is part of life. Learning to recognize and manage stress during good and bad times can help you get through it again in the future. However, if you feel like you are worrying too much or are experiencing the stress indicators mentioned earlier, talk to someone. Talk to your family, health care provider, religious advisor, or mental health counselor. You might need some extra help with your stress.

Getting help for yourself is the best thing you can do for your entire family. To find a mental health provider in your area, check the resources at the website of the Montana Mental Health Association at <http://montanamentalhealth.org> or call them at 877-927-MMHA (6642).

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## POSITIVE STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING STRESS

According to research, families who handle challenges and stress in a positive manner use the following strategies. A family does not need to use all of the strategies listed to successfully handle stressful times.

**Have open communication with family members** – The stress is affecting everyone in the family, therefore talking and listening to one another can help the family through the tough time.

**Be flexible** – Family members have different roles and expectations. During stressful times some of those roles need to change. For example, if a full-time homemaker starts working outside the home, the rest of the family may need to pitch in and help with household tasks.

**Stick together** – Families who feel that they are connected to each other do better in handling difficult times. Members feel they can rely on one another to help them through a challenging period. Make a point to keep family activities a priority.

**Gain information/resources** – Find out more about the resources available in your community to help with the challenges you are facing. Get information from your library, Extension Service, or from the Internet.

**Seek help and support from others** – Reaching out can be difficult for families, but those who do reach out in a time of need are better able to handle the stress and avoid a crisis. Neighbors, other family members, or community resources may be able to provide you with the support you need.

**Maintain faith/spirituality** – Having a sense of spirituality gives us the inner strength needed to handle tough times. For some people this may mean active participation in a religious organization. For others it may mean taking a walk to reflect.

**Develop family member autonomy** – While family members need to be connected, each needs to feel a sense of independence. This helps each one realize that he/she has some control and the ability to be a part of the solution to help the family through rough times.



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