



PARENT RESOURCE

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR PARENTS

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Stress is something that is a part of all of our lives. It is impossible to totally avoid stress. In fact, mild to moderate amounts of stress can be good for you. Too much stress, however, can result in various problems. Specific reactions to stress vary from person to person. Excessive stress can have a negative effect on people's health, making them more susceptible to illness. Too much stress can also have a negative effect on relationships with family and friends. Regardless of how stress affects an individual, all people experiencing excessive stress need to identify what stressors are impacting them, and how to prevent and manage stress.

Signs That You May Be Experiencing Too Much Stress

There are many clues that your body gives that indicate you are under too much stress. Such clues may include a tight throat, sweaty palms, headache, fatigue, nausea, diarrhea, uneasiness, indigestion, depression, restlessness, frustration, and changes in sleeping or eating patterns. People who learn how to recognize these stress signs have taken the first step to combating stress. If high levels of stress continue, it can lead to numerous problems including increased risk of illness, increased risk of accidents, decreased satisfaction with life, and increased risk of alcohol and/or drug abuse.

Increased risk of illness.

There are a number of illnesses that are directly related to too much stress in one's life. Such illnesses include high blood pressure, coronary disease, and ulcers. Too much stress can also affect a person's immune system, making it more difficult to combat illnesses when they occur. Such people may get ill more easily and take longer to recover than a person who is not under stress.*Increased risk of accidents. There is a great deal of research indicating that when people are under a lot of stress they tend to have more accidents. People who are

stressed are probably less likely to follow safety precautions and may have slower reaction times because they are preoccupied.*Decreased satisfaction. People who are under too much stress generally aren't able to enjoy themselves. Relationships with family and friends may suffer as a result, leaving the stressed-out person with little or no support.

Increased risk of alcohol and/or drug abuse.

People who are under too much stress and who have not developed effective coping skills run the risk of abusing drugs and/or alcohol. People who don't know how to cope with their stress in constructive ways may turn to artificial means such as alcohol, drugs, or food to relieve their stress. When this happens, the stress is compounded.

Things That Can Be Done to Decrease Stress

When you're experiencing stress, don't ignore it. Learn to recognize what causes stress in your life. When you feel stress coming on, take steps to control it, rather than letting it control you. Whenever possible, try to eliminate significant stressors in your life.

Reframe your stress.

You can control the way events affect you. You decide to a large extent how stressful a particular situation is for you. Try to take steps to change your interpretations of the things that cause stress for you. For example, if your spouse overreacts to a minor incident and yells at you, instead of letting the incident overly upset you, you can choose to reframe it by saying to yourself, "He's usually not so touchy about that. He must be having a bad day." This is an example of reframing a stressful situation. The key is to try to come up with alternative interpretations to stressful situations that will relieve the stress. Of course, it's not possible to reframe every stressful situation. There will be times when the stress you perceive in a situation is quite real. For example, if a mean looking dog begins chasing you, it is probably best to run instead of trying to reframe the stress you feel!

Work on changing your beliefs.

Your beliefs determine a lot about your life: How you behave, how you raise your children, the choices you make in life, etc. Your beliefs also determine what will and will not be stressful for you. Sometimes certain faulty beliefs lead to increased stress. In these instances it's a good idea to make an attempt to change these specific beliefs. For example, if you believe that your children should be well-behaved at all times, you will likely experience frequent stress when they misbehave. In such a case, it would reduce stress to alter this belief to one that allows for normal misbehavior that is common in all children.

Don't be perfectionistic.

It's not possible to be perfect in all areas of your life. Don't be so hard on yourself. Realize that you cannot do everything perfectly. Be more realistic in your expectations of yourself.

Develop good problem-solving skills.

When faced with a significant problem, try to clearly define the exact problem. Then generate a list of various ways the problem could be managed. Evaluate each potential solution and then make a decision.

Choose how to spend your time wisely.

It is important to decide which activities are important to you, and which are not. It is also important that you know your limit. Don't take on more than you can handle. One very important skill to develop is the ability to say "no."

Don't put off making decisions.

Many people create and prolong stress by delaying a decision that needs to be made. They end up brooding about an issue rather than resolving it. Once you have all the information necessary to make a decision, try to make the decision as quickly as possible. Avoid hashing and rehashing issues once a decision has been made.

Get organized.

Getting organized will help you make better use of your time and energy. Set realistic goals for yourself and stick to them. Getting organized also involves learning how to plan. Try to plan your activities in advance. Make lists and then rank each item on the list in order of priority. To increase your motivation to complete items on your list, decide in advance to do something enjoyable when you have completed specific items on your list. Another important part of getting organized is to stop procrastinating. Procrastination is putting off things that need to be done. This is a great time waster and stress increaser.

Learn how to relax.

Relaxation skills can help you release tension caused by stress. There are many different ways of relaxing. Some people use their imagination to help them relax. They do this by closing their eyes, and trying to focus on positive and relaxing images (e.g., lying on a beach). Many specialized relaxation techniques are complex and require training (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation that involves learning how to tense and relax specific muscle groups). Health care providers who deal with stress-related disorders can often recommend professionals who

offer training in these relaxation techniques. The use of specific relaxation skills, when used on a regular basis, has been shown to help people combat the physical and mental aspects of stress.

Get enough sleep and/or rest.

People who do not get enough sleep and/or rest will not have the energy required to combat life's stresses. Make an effort to get to bed at a decent hour every night. An adequate and consistent sleeping schedule is important to your physical and mental health. If you have trouble falling asleep at night, practice specific relaxation techniques. Try to avoid using sleeping pills or alcohol to help you go to sleep.

Set aside time for fun.

Make sure you set aside time for fun in your schedule. Participating in fun activities is a great way to restore energy. Such activities could be solitary hobbies, or things done with the family or a group of friends. What's important is that it is enjoyable to you.

Eat a well-balanced diet.

Proper nutrition is a very important part of combating stress. Food is what gives a person the energy to combat stress. The best diet for stress is one that is natural (with few additives), has the right amount of calories -just enough to maintain a healthy body weight, and is balanced. Increase your consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Decrease your intake of foods high in fat, cholesterol, and refined sugars. Decrease salt and caffeine in your diet.

Maintain a healthy body weight.

Being overweight is stressful to your body and makes it more difficult to combat stress. A healthy weight allows you to have greater energy which enables you to handle stress more effectively.

Get regular exercise.

Exercise is an excellent way to combat stress. First of all, it works out tension that has built up in your body. Secondly, exercise provides for physical fitness, which allows you to more efficiently combat stress. Finally, exercise helps clear the mind, making it easier to relax. Exercise, however, will not be effective in combating stress unless it is done regularly. The specific activity that is chosen is not important. What is important is that it is enjoyable to you, and you stick with it.

Develop a budget.

Money (or rather lack of money) is a significant stressor to many individuals. If this is a concern for you, it is important to develop a weekly or monthly budget. Once you develop a budget, stay within it! If you have major financial problems consult a professional for advice (many communities have programs that offer free financial planning services for individuals in financial distress).

Focus on the positives.

When people are under a lot of stress they tend to focus more on negative events. It is important not to lose perspective on your life. Try to maintain a focus on the positive aspects of your life both at home and at work.

Develop support systems.

When you are under stress, you need the support of people around you. Learn how to reach out to those around you for comfort and support. Find a trusted friend to talk to about your stress. To develop an adequate support system, you must be willing to give support to others, too. Learn how to be a good friend. Listen to others and provide a shoulder to lean on when they are under stress and need support.

Maintain a sense of humor.

A sense of humor is critical in helping people handle stress. It is important not to take things too seriously. People who can laugh at themselves tend to be able to handle stress more effectively. Try to look for humor in stressful situations.

Seek professional assistance if you have significant problems coping with stress.

Consult with your health care provider if you feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with the stressors in your life and/or would like assistance learning how to more effectively cope with stress.

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