

Managing the Stress of Parenting

Every parent feels some pressure to be the "perfect" role model. While it is impossible to be perfect, you can be a positive influence on your kids by practicing self-control techniques and relaxation methods. Learn to identify the source of your stress by tuning into your body's physical symptoms. Ask for help when you need it, and take advantage of support resources available to you. Ultimately, you can keep parenting stress from getting the best of you by learning more about what triggers your stress and how to implement calming techniques into your life.

Why Parents Feel Stressed

Here are some common stress triggers for parents:

- **Unfair expectations:** Many parents have an unrealistic vision for their family – an expectation that each member should be as close to perfect as possible. When children or spouses fail to live up to these standards, it is easy to become frustrated and stressed.
- **Unresolved conflicts:** Difficulties from your childhood or unresolved anger toward your own parents can make it hard to know how to act as a parent. Even if you feel your parents did the wrong things, it can be confusing to know what the right ones are.
- **Lack of time for yourself:** Parents miss the free time they once enjoyed. It is better to face the fact that your children will demand and deserve your time than to resent it. Remind yourself that as your children grow up, their independence will allow you to reclaim some of your time.
- **Lack of appreciation:** Parents can experience resentment if they feel that their child does not respect or appreciate them. It is important to keep in mind that showing appreciation is probably a more natural concept for adults than it is for kids.
- **Navigating the demands of work and home:** Dual-earner couples with children have become much more common than a generation ago. Many parents have no experience or role models to turn to when they need help navigating competing demands on their time, energy and emotions.

Signs of Stress

It is important to recognize the physical symptoms of stress. Of course, it is always a good idea to rule out any possible physical illness that could be contributing to these symptoms by visiting your doctor. Common physical complaints linked to stress include:

- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Muscle spasms or nervous twitches
- Headaches

- Grinding teeth or a clenched jaw
- Clenched fists
- Nervous habits, such as picking at skin or biting nails
- Fidgety or jittery hands
- Skin rashes
- Recurrent colds or flus
- Forgetfulness
- Upset stomach.

Ways to Cope with Stress

Try these suggestions:

- **Seek help:** Do not wait until your breaking point if you cannot control your anger.
- **Recognize and admit when you are feeling anxious and stressed:** Listen to what your body is telling you through physical signs of stress, such as headaches and stomach discomfort.
- **Ask yourself these questions:**
 - What is the worst thing that can happen?
 - Is there anything more I can do to improve the situation?
 - How will this outcome affect my life in the long run?
 - What can I learn from this?
 - What advice would I give to someone else in this situation?
- **Avoid setting unrealistic expectations and too many lofty goals:** Remember that all children misbehave, and all parents make mistakes. Sometimes being good is good enough.
- **Focus on the positives:** Recognize that for everything that may go wrong, there may be multiple things that go right. Be proud of your accomplishments, and celebrate your successes. Create a "joy" journal in which you list at least five things a day you are grateful for.
- **Make time for yourself:** Take a little time each day for something you like to do: a hobby, a walk with your partner, a home improvement project, etc. Spend a half-hour just sitting quietly listening to soothing music or meditating peacefully. Take advantage of your free time engaging in fulfilling activities. Arrange for a babysitter, or take advantage of relatives who can relieve you for a few hours.
- **Learn to say "no" and to delegate responsibilities at home and work:** Remember, when you ask for help with a chore or project, you give up the expectation that it will be completed exactly as you would have.
- **Alternate parenting duties:** Adopt a "tag-team" approach with your spouse, and take turns with disciplining, playing with your kids, driving to and from events, etc.
- **Get your home organized:** Tackle one task at a time, if possible. List out your duties in order of priority, and complete one at a time. This can make you feel more organized and in control, leading to a sense of greater accomplishment. Create schedules and calendars to stay on track.

- **Break from home routines:** While schedules and consistency are very important for families, it is OK to do something spontaneously different with your kids from time to time. Make it a fun break from the norm – such as letting your kids stay up an hour later one weekend night to play a family board game together.
- **Identify your trigger points and know your limits:** Get to know the situations and circumstances that cause you the most stress, and learn ways to avoid them.
- **Laugh and learn:** Instead of getting irritated, learn to laugh at life's annoyances and learn from your mistakes. Accept stress as an everyday part of life. Often, the best way to cope is to "go with the flow" – to accept those things that we cannot currently change.
- **Get enough rest:** Doctors recommend at least eight hours of sleep a night for adults. There is a term for those who say they can get by on four or five – sleep-deprived.
- **Exercise regularly:** Swimming, running, brisk walking, aerobic exercises, and other repetitive fitness activities are especially beneficial. Experts recommend exercising at least 20 to 30 minutes three to five times a week.
- **Avoid drugs:** Do not rely on over-the-counter drugs, such as aspirin, to manage your stress. Talk to your doctor about taking any medications properly. Stay away from alcohol, tranquilizers, and other drugs. These may contribute to depression and an increased sense of loss of control.

Tips for Relaxation

Try these techniques to help you relax and reduce the stress of parenting:

- **Breathing exercises:** Draw slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm, which is located just below the center of your ribcage. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this lying on your back.
- **Yoga and stretching exercises:** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible, and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Visualization:** Try sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes, and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation techniques:** Try tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. Make a fist, and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, and your limbs.

Aim to organize your home, and plan your time efficiently. Do not be afraid to ask for help from loved ones, and when you feel you have reached your boiling point, step back and take time to yourself. It is not worth losing your temper and doing something you will regret. Regain your composure, and practice those techniques that help to calm and soothe your nerves.

Ask other parents for their advice on handling parenting pressures, and share your suggestions with them.

Resources

- Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development: www.nichd.nih.gov
- Mental Health America: www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- National Healthy Marriage Resource Center: www.twoofus.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org

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