

# Stress and Parenting

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## Stress in America

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is "a great deal of stress": Americans, on average, believe 3.6 would be a healthy level of stress. However, Americans rate themselves as 5.6 on average. 72% say their stress level has increased or stayed the same over the past 5 years. 70% have symptoms related to stress, such as irritability, fatigue, feeling overwhelmed, changes in sleeping habits, or unhealthy eating habits. Parents of young children have extra stressors such as recent changes in financial status and relationships, disrupted sleep, and the challenges of constantly supervising energetic, emotional children.

## Types of stress

- Positive stress comes from short-term challenges. These can be learning experiences, build resilience, and teach skills for managing future stress. Examples: a new job, a move to a new home, or minor issues like a broken item you need to learn to repair.
- Tolerable stress is from experiences that are intense but fairly short-lived, like the death of a loved one, divorce, or a frightening accident. These can be managed, but we may need support from those around us and need to practice self-care.
- Toxic stress results from *intense* adverse experiences over a *long period* of time. Our stress response system evolved to handle short-term threats, like running away from a saber-tooth tiger. If we are in stress response for a long time, the cortisol can damage our health. The more out of control someone feels, the more likely they experience harm from the stress. This could include living in an unsafe environment, domestic violence, addiction in a family member, a toxic work environment or homelessness.

## How stress affects children

Research and experience have shown parental stress can impact children:

- In the short-term, stress may lead a parent to be less patient, and to get more annoyed more quickly, thus leading to over-reacting to small things.
- Children of stressed parents have more headaches, insomnia, irritability, behavior issues.
- Long-term chronic stress can affect brain development, disrupt immune system, increase the risk of obesity, mental health issues, learning disabilities, heart disease, and allergies.
- If the parent models unhealthy coping mechanisms, it can also increase the risk of the child experiencing substance abuse, eating disorders, and self-harming behaviors.

HOWEVER.... If parents work to reduce stress, model healthy coping behaviors, seek support when needed, and offer their kids support, that *significantly reduces the chance of ill effects*.

# Reducing stress and managing stress

## Reducing your stress level – a stress inventory

Make a list of the things that stress you out. Then put a check by the ones you feel *out of control of*. Those are the ones that create the most toxic stress. Can you eliminate them? Reduce them? What do you need to do to manage them? Can you ask someone for help?

### Handling a bad day

We're all going to have "bad days" now and then, where we're sad all day, or cranky all day, sometimes for no reason at all, sometimes for many very good reasons. What we can do:

- Talk to our kids about how we're feeling and why. Even young children can see our anger or sadness, and if we don't explain, they assume it's their fault.
- Ask your child for ideas/advice for what helps *them* when they're feeling grumpy or sad. This helps reinforce that we all need to develop and use healthy coping skills, and we can all ask for help when needed.
- If you are doing an activity to reduce your stress, like deep breathing, exercise, or going for a walk, ask your child to join you. That will help them release the stress they've absorbed from you.
- Don't be afraid to admit when you did something wrong. Apologize if you yelled at them or hurt them.

### Model healthy coping behaviors

Children learn a lot from just observing us. Sometimes they learn positive things – like when we model healthy coping strategies and self-care. Sometimes they see the less positive ways we respond to stressful situations. John Medina, in Brain Rules, recommends this exercise.

1. Make a list of the behaviors you usually demonstrate to the world: do you laugh a lot? Swear a lot? Express joy? Express frustration? Eat healthy? Comfort eat? Retail therapy? Talk with friends? Spend a lot of time looking at screens?
2. Circle the ones you are proud of, and would want your child to copy. Cross out things you're not proud of, and you'd be ashamed to see your child doing them.
3. Commit to doing something about it. Do more of the good, and less of the bad.

### Stress reducers to try

- Take deep breaths. Imagine breathing in calm, and releasing tension on each exhale.
- Visualization. Imagine yourself in a calm, safe environment. Visualize what you would see, smell, hear, feel, and taste. The more vivid the image, the more it will calm you.
- Muscle relaxation. When you catch yourself worrying, instead, focus on this exercise. Notice where you are tense, take a deep breath, and let that muscle relax and soften.
- Social support. Reach out to a friend. Ideally, talk about what's stressing you and get support with that. If you're not comfortable sharing, even small talk can reduce stress.
- Re-define success. If you think you need to be a perfect parent every day, you're going to fail at meeting that standard. But, if you think: "I hope to have more good-parent days than crappy-parent days", that's achievable, and your stress will drop.
- Eat well: Eat whole, non-processed foods, especially those high in potassium, magnesium, calcium, and omega-3s. Consume caffeine in moderation.
- Be physically active. Exercise is a great stress reliever. Be active in whatever way works for you. Many people find a walk outdoors to be especially relaxing.
- Relax with music. Sit and listen to music, or dance, or make music.
- If you're angry at someone, try empathizing with why you imagine they might be having a bad day too, and think positive thoughts about that person.
- Make space in your life for self-care: do little things that make you happy, whether that's reading, doing puzzles, visiting friends, or whatever! You deserve special time!