

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 5.2 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 toddlers certainly feel stress such as recent changes in financial status and relationships, disrupted sleep schedules, and the challenges of constantly supervising energetic, emotionally volatile children.

Types of stress

- Positive stress comes from short-term challenges, such as getting a shot, having a toy taken away, falling and hurting themselves. If children are given support in managing and overcoming the challenge, these offer good learning experiences, and teach skills for managing future stressors.
- Tolerable stress is from adverse experiences that are intense but fairly short-lived, like the death of a loved one, moving to a new home, a frightening accident. With support, these can also be managed.
- Toxic stress results from *intense* adverse experiences over a *long period* of time – weeks to years. Our stress response system was designed for 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 the brain. The more out of control someone feels about a situation, the more likely they are to experience harm from the stress.

How stress affects children

Research and experience have shown that

- In the short-term, stress may lead a parent to be less patient, and to get more annoyed more quickly, thus leading to sometimes over-reacting to small things. (For example, a parent who is over-burdened with tasks may get very upset at the everyday messes that a toddler creates.)
- Children of stressed parents may have more headaches, insomnia, irritability, and behavior issues.
- Long-term chronic stress can affect brain development and disrupt functioning of the immune system. On-going stress in childhood can 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 children support with coping, the chance of their children suffering these ill effects decreases.

Reducing stress and managing stress

Reducing your stress level

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 if the why is "I don't know why I feel like this"). 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 for what helps them when they're feeling grumpy or sad. This helps reinforce for them that we all need to develop coping skills, and when we're not coping, we can all ask for help.
- If you are doing an activity to reduce your stress, like deep breathing, exercise, or dancing to music, 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 to them if you yelled or hurt them.

Model healthy coping behaviors

Children learn a lot from what we say to them when we are meaning to "teach" them. They learn even more from observing us as we go through our days. 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 all the behaviors you usually demonstrate to the world: do you laugh a lot? Swear a lot? Express joy? Express frustration? Eat healthy? Spend a lot of time looking at screens?
2. Circle the ones you are most proud of, and/or the ones you want your child to copy. If there are things you're not proud of, and you would be ashamed to see your child doing them, cross those out.
3. Commit to doing something about it. Do more of the good, and less of the bad.

Stress reducers to try

- Take a few deep breaths. Imagine breathing in calm, and releasing tension with the exhale.
- Visualization. Imagine yourself in a calm, safe environment. Visualize what you would see, smell, hear, feel, and taste there. 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, you talk about what's stressing you and get support with that. But sometimes even a chat about the weather can reduce your stress level.
- Re-define success. If you think you must be a perfect parent every day, you're going to fail at that. But, if you think: I hope to have more good-parent days than crappy-parent days, your stress level will drop.
- Eat well: Eat whole, non-processed foods, especially those high in potassium, magnesium, calcium, and omega-3s. Caffeine in moderation.
- Be physically active. Exercise is one of the best stress relievers. This doesn't mean you should get stressed out that you failed to go to the gym! Just be active in whatever way works for you.
- Relax with music. Listen to music, dance, or make music.
- If you're angry at someone (like the person who just cut you off in traffic), try thinking positive thoughts about that person, and empathize with why they might be having a bad day too.
- Make more space in your life for self-care: doing the little things that make you happy, whether that's reading, playing piano, visiting friends, or whatever! You deserve some special time!

Resources for more tips on managing stress

www.parentmap.com/category/parent-life; www.parenttrust.org/for-families/parenting-advice/parenting-tips/tips-stress-management/

Sources

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