

# STRESS

## aking Charge

### *Sources of stress*

- Changing parent and grandparent roles
- Changing couple relationship
- Choosing meaningful roles and activities
- Financial uncertainty
- Physical changes or illness
- Grief
- Loneliness
- Maintaining independence

File: Family life 3

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... and justice for all

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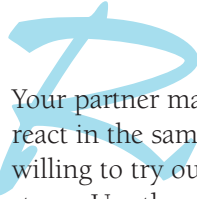
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# Managing Stress in Later Life Families

*Rose isn't sleeping well. Retirement from her demanding job has been disappointing. "Relax," her kids say, "you deserve it." But Rose feels tense and worried about her future. Her husband Mel, retired for two years, doesn't seem interested in traveling and talks about finding a new job. Rose feels strange not working. Wasn't retirement supposed to be fun?*

As you grow older, you may dream of freedom to travel, new interests, economic comfort, and more time with friends and family. Reality seldom seems to match expectations. Both the losses and gains of new roles can be stressors. Leaving a job may mean more freedom but it also may involve losses of challenging work, relationships, daily routine, or a sense of security. Family needs keep changing too, sometimes in unexpected ways.

What you've learned from past experiences can help you manage new stresses. You can't eliminate stress, but you can make choices about how you will use your resources in new situations.



## Relationships: With Your Spouse

Your partner may not experience the same stressors that you do or react in the same way. Talking together about your needs and being willing to try out new ways of doing things are good ways to manage stress. Use the strength of your long relationship as a resource during times of change.

- Make time to talk. Be clear about your needs and feelings.
- Take time to listen to your spouse.
- Stay flexible and be willing to take some risks.
- Use the experience you have gained from other difficult times.
- Plan things you both enjoy.

## Relationships: With Your Adult Children

*After 45 years of marriage Marge and Jim have lots of retirement plans, including spending time as international volunteers. Now sadness and anxiety over their daughter's divorce threatens their dreams. How can they help their daughter and grandchildren? How should they relate to their son-in-law?*

You don't ever stop being a parent. Worry, disappointment, or sadness about family members can seem overwhelming, but it is important to let go of the need to solve an adult child's problems. Focus on the things you can do to show your support.

- Recognize that you cannot protect your family from pain.
- Keep communication open with your children and grandchildren.
- Find someone to talk to about your own feelings.
- Set boundaries for what you can do and how much you can do.
- Take care of your own health and relationships.

## Relationships: Grandparenting

Grandparents provide a vital link between generations. Grandparenting is not a role you choose, but you can decide how to carry it out. Disagreements with your children about your grandparenting role are stressful. Long distance separation, conflicting responsibilities, or serving as a substitute parent are other sources of stress.

- Talk with your children about expectations.
- Value the role of grandparent; it fills a vital need.
- Seek support if you are a grandparent who is parenting.

## Managing Resources

After years filled with the demands of family and employment, most retirees are delighted to have enough time to pursue the activities they like the most. Some people, however, find that they have too much time. Their days are long; they miss the demands of the world of work. If you are in this group, the key to successful time management

is developing your own structure for your time. What are the things you want to accomplish in the next month or year? How do those long-term goals translate into daily objectives? Plan your day around those short-term objectives. One of the most effective ways to become involved in your community is to volunteer. Such activities not only can add structure to your life; they can be immensely satisfying as well.

Although not rich, most retirees have enough money to live comfortably. Nevertheless, many elderly individuals are concerned about their finances. For some, the question is, "Will my money last my lifetime?" For others, the issue is one of cash flow; there is too much money at the end of the month. The best way to guarantee that your retirement funds last as long as you do is to continue to invest in low-risk investments. Also, make sure your insurance coverage is adequate.

If financial resources are short, are there other resources that could be used to generate more income? Could you consider a part-time job? Are there assets that could be sold, with the proceeds reinvested in income-producing assets?

### **Grief and Stress**

*Roger hangs up the phone and stares at the stack of documents on his desk. The lawyer recommended by the Alzheimer's Association was helpful. He can't change the impact of devastating expenses for Peggy's care, but it helps to get good advice. Roger misses Peggy constantly. Their home of 50 years seems empty.*

Grief with its resulting changes and decisions is a source of severe stress. Grief is a normal response to the death of loved ones and friends, long-term illness of a spouse, physical separation, or loss of cherished dreams. When losses are chronic and outcomes are not clear, as in a progressive illness, it is very hard to manage the continuing stress. You

will need help from others as you grieve. You also may need to help people understand your situation.

- Ask for help from friends, church, or professionals.
- Accept support from neighbors, friends, and family.
- Allow yourself as much time to grieve as you need.
- Take special care of your health.

### **Loneliness and Stress**

Loneliness is natural when you miss loved ones, leave your old home, or lose your sense of purpose. The way you think about your loneliness can affect how stressful it is for you.

Blaming others or waiting for someone to notice your sadness takes the control away from you. Taking some action, no matter how small, helps.

- Get to know the people who live near you.
- Learn a new skill through adult education.
- Offer your time. Call the volunteer bureau, or Retired Senior Volunteers Program.
- Enrich your long-distance relationships through letters.

### **Eat Well, Be Well**

Although no specific food can cure or alleviate stress, eating well can help you feel your best. Eating to maintain your health and strength isn't complex or time-consuming either.

Maintain an eating routine. Set aside certain times of day to eat meals and snacks. Going without food, even if you don't think you are hungry, leads to feeling weak, sick, and confused.

You may feel more interested in eating if you get together with others, for example at a congregational meal site at noon, or with a neighbor in the evening one or two times a week.

Keep it simple. A healthful diet includes a variety of foods every day. Focus on fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole-grain breads and cereals, and lean meats. If you have a health condition that

requires you to eat a certain way, be sure to do it. Take care of yourself by eating right. Simple, healthful eating can help you feel capable, positive, and alert. You can take charge by doing something good for yourself.

- Remember to eat regular meals and snacks.
- Share meal times with others.
- Focus on fruits and vegetables.
- Limit high-fat foods.
- Keep a supply of convenient, low-calorie foods on hand.
- Build physical activity, such as walking, into your daily life.
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water each day.

### **Health Changes and Stress**

*Joe and Ellen have been farming for 55 years. Lately their children have been urging them to get a nice place in town. Joe's health is poor. Still, this farm is home. They feel trapped between what they love and their physical limitations.*

It's painful to give up familiar things. Change is especially stressful when you feel others are choosing for you. It's important to help your family understand your feelings but also to accept their concerns for you.

- Learn about resources for help. Call your Area Agency on Aging.
- Discuss options with your whole family.
- Listen to others' feelings but be honest about your own needs.
- Take your time. Staying in place may be an option.
- Consider the consequences of choices for you and your family.

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### **Look for More Information**

H&G 252 *The Food Guide Pyramid*  
H&G-250 *Making Healthy Food Choices*  
PNW 439 *Loss and Grief in Later Life*  
NCR 263j *Wellness in Retirement*  
Pm 1273 *How to Help When You Don't Know What to Say*  
Pm 1660a *Stress: Taking Charge—All about Stress*  
Pm 1167a-i, *Ready, Set, Retire*