

STRESS

taking Charge

Points about Stress

- Stressors are demands upon us that require more than routine adjustments.
- Stress is our response to demands upon us.
- We experience stress in physical, emotional, and behavioral ways.
- We can't eliminate all stress.
- We can live better with stress when we recognize impacts, choose responses, and build resources.

File: Family life 3

Prepared by Colleen D. Jolly, Iowa State University Extension family life specialist, Department of Human Development and Family Studies.
Edited by Carol Ouverson, communication specialist. Designed by Lynn Ekblad.

... and justice for all

The Iowa Cooperative Extension Service's programs and policies are consistent with pertinent federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination. Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients.

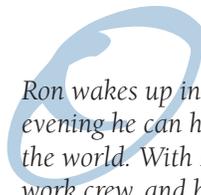
Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

All about Stress

Company restructuring has cost Sally her job. She's devastated, but her husband, Sam, and the children have been supportive and encouraging. They've talked together about having to spend less. They all remember how hard it was 10 years ago when they lost the family farm and moved to town. Sally and Sam both are worried about the future, but they think they can get by until Sally finds another job.

A stressful event means different things at different times in our lives. Other stressors we face, how severe the event is, and how long it lasts all influence what it means to us. How well individuals and families can manage the impact of stress also depends on the resources they have available such as:

- what they've learned from past experiences
- how family members relate to each other
- support from relatives, friends, or the community
- financial resources
- skills



One of the most important stressors is change.

Ron wakes up in the morning feeling worried. By noon his head aches. By evening he can hardly talk to his wife. He thinks he should feel on top of the world. With Kim finally off to college, his promotion to foreman of his work crew, and his wife's new job, they have all they've been waiting for.

Change Comes from Within Families

At each new stage of life expected and normal changes occur in families. Even though they are expected, they can still result in stress. Changes, whether they seem good or bad, involve readjustment and often some loss. Sometimes our expectations about the results of a change are unrealistic. It's stressful when we find that what happens is different from what we thought would happen.

Unexpected changes also impact families with swift and sometimes tragic loss. Death or disabling injury or illness, divorce, and job loss turn life upside down. Readjustment is slow and painful. (See *Learning to Live Through Loss*, NCR 537a-e.)

Change Comes from Outside Our Family Boundaries

Changes in the world around us can threaten our own sense of order and security. They can require us to learn things we never expected to learn, take in more information than we can manage, or accept things that seem unacceptable. Stressful changes include:

- corporate restructuring
- political and economic trends
- changes in our institutions
- new ways of doing our work; rapid technological change
- instant access to world-wide problems through the media
- new and varied structures for our families

Change creates new opportunities, but also may involve loss of:

- familiar ways to do things
- feeling useful, skilled, or needed
- loved ones' presence and companionship
- dreams for a future now changed
- health
- security or confidence

What Happens When We're under Too Much Stress?

Most of the time we probably aren't even aware of our automatic physical reactions to everyday hassles, problems, worries, or crises. In an emergency these same stress responses help us act quickly. Automatic changes in body chemistry, heart rate, and blood pressure tense us for action and resistance. As the threat is resolved, our bodies adapt and return to normal function.

Many stressors in our lives continue for a long time. We can't always change them; sometimes we don't even recognize them as sources of stress. Over time the constant physical and emotional adaptations to those stressors can take a toll. Physical or emotional symptoms, changes in our behavior or changes in our mental health can be signals that we are living with too much stress.

Here are some of the ways in which we might experience stress. We may notice other symptoms or combinations of symptoms. Paying attention to them is a good first step in taking charge of the stress in our lives.

Physical

- headaches
- appetite or weight changes
- feeling tired all the time
- changes in sleep habits
- muscle aches
- getting sick often

Emotional

- anger
- sadness or crying spells
- irritability or short temper
- worry or anxiety
- discouragement
- trouble relaxing
- emptiness or loss of direction
- looking for magic solutions

Behavioral

- increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- trouble concentrating
- avoiding decisions
- low productivity
- forgetfulness
- boredom

Relationships

- problems with marriage or children
- intolerance of others
- fewer contacts with friends
- nagging
- lowered sex drive
- loneliness
- resentment

What Do We Know about Managing Stress?

It's impossible to eliminate stress. It's more realistic to look for ways to reduce the anxious, frenzied, or fatiguing symptoms that get in the way of our work or personal lives. At times our goal may simply be how to continue to live well in spite of loss.

Here are some ideas that may help.

- Do something about one small piece of a problem.
- Ask for support from our families, friends, or community resources.
- Use exercise to relieve physical and emotional symptoms.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Make time for quiet or meditation.
- Eat well and avoid drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.
- Accept change as part of life.

Barriers to Managing Stress

Rene's job gets harder as her company hires fewer people. She feels resentful and angry at her boss. Rene has read countless articles about stress and tried lots of relaxation techniques. Still she says 'yes' whenever she's asked to take on another task. She takes work home at night and often gets little sleep. She's been sick a lot this year.

Even when we know we need a change, it's hard to take the steps that might help. Anxiety, worry, too little time, and too many responsibilities make taking charge seem impossible. In fact the more stressed we are, the more some of the symptoms of stress get in the way of making changes.

Barriers like these or others may prevent us from taking charge of some of the changes that will help us live better with stress.

- Trying to solve too many problems at once makes change overwhelming.
- Blaming others, "the system," or "fate" prevents action.
- The buildup of stressors in our lives may affect our judgment and initiative.
- Using drugs or alcohol as substitutes for resolving problems increases stress.

- A negative outlook makes us believe nothing can change.

Recognizing barriers that keep us stuck with stress gives us the choice of finding ways around them. Often we need to ask for help from more than one source.

Building Resources for Living with Stress

We can take some control by working on personal and family strengths that will help us be more resilient to the effects of stress.

- Make choices that increase time with family or friends. They are an important buffer against the impact of stress.
- Practice appreciative communication in our families. Each person deserves to be listened to. Each person learns to listen.
- Take care of personal health. It's a protective factor in stressful times.
- Strengthen spiritual resources.
- Keep what is most important to ourselves and our families at the center of our choices.
- Be aware of the changes and stressors we experience. Choose to postpone new commitments if there is already too much stress in our lives.
- Increase our skills in money and time management
- Reach out to people in our community. Being there for others strengthens our own circle of support.

Look for More Information

(Series) *Stress—Taking Charge:*

- Pm 1660b, *Managing Stress in Young Families*
 - Pm 1660c, *Managing Stress in Families with Teens*
 - Pm 1660d, *Managing Stress in Mid-Life Families*
 - Pm 1660e, *Managing Stress in Later Life Families*
 - Pm 1660f, *Helping Children Manage Stress*
 - Pm 1660g, *Managing Conflict with Teens*
- Pm 1404a-f, *Balancing Work and Family*