

Triple P Tip Sheet

Positive Parenting

Coping With Stress

Being a parent is busy and demanding and it is normal for parents to feel stressed at times. However, if parents often have high levels of stress, it can be hard for them to deal with their children's behaviour calmly, and they may be less likely to spend time with their children. Children are likely to grow up happy and learn what is expected of them when their parents are calm and consistently use positive parenting strategies. Although it is not possible to be perfectly calm and consistent all of the time, there are things that parents can do to help cope with the everyday demands of raising children. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you learn to manage day-to-day stress so that you can act calmly and consistently with your children.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a natural response to a threat or a challenge — it is your mind's and body's way of preparing you to do your best. When a person experiences stress, their body may feel tense and they may have lots of things going through their mind. Everyone feels a certain amount of stress each day, which helps to create the energy to get things done. Stress can be helpful if it only happens now and then, and in moderation. Feeling very stressed all the time is not helpful. The more stressed you feel, the harder it is to cope with things going on around you. Stress can also lead to feelings such as anger, frustration, irritability, anxiety, tiredness, despair and depression.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Being a parent is a challenging job. There seems to be so much to do. You have to balance the demands of your children, your partner, your household, your friends and family, and your work. It is not surprising that parents sometimes feel stressed. A lot of the stress of parenting can come from what you expect of yourself. Parents can set themselves up for unnecessary stress when they expect too much. It is unreasonable to expect that you can always keep the house tidy, that your children will always behave perfectly, that you will always be on time, and that you can always say *Yes* when others ask you for help.

Stress can also be caused by how you think about things. The way you think about yourself and what is going on around you can affect how you feel. Unhelpful ways of thinking that increase your stress include expecting the worst to happen, exaggerating the bad things and ignoring the good things, blaming yourself, or thinking that you *must* or *should* do things. For example, imagine

your child has just knocked over a cup of milk at the breakfast table. If you think that you are a bad parent because you cannot even teach your children how to hold a cup properly, or you think that there is something wrong with your child because they spill things, or you imagine that your partner will walk in and yell at you for not controlling the children, you are likely to feel stressed. These thoughts all make the problem seem worse than it really is. On the other hand, if your thinking is more realistic and you tell yourself your child is only young and learning how to drink from a cup, and accidents will happen, you are less likely to feel stressed.

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT PARENTING?

The way we feel affects the way we get on with others, including our children. When parents are under stress, they are less likely to be calm and consistent with their children. When their energy

levels and concentration are affected, parents may spend less time with their children, provide less supervision or be irritable and impatient. Parents under stress may have explosive outbursts over little things their children do that normally would not worry them. If they get angry, they may be more likely to criticise their child and the risk is that they may lose control and harm their child.

When under stress, some parents may be very aware of what their child is doing but their view of their child's behaviour may change. They may see ordinary child behaviour as bad or accidents as being done on purpose. Some parents can feel so irritable that they just want their children out of the way, regardless of how they are behaving. Sometimes parents feel so tired and worn out that they cannot bring themselves to praise or reward their children for good behaviour or carry out a discipline routine, even if it is needed.

HOW TO RECOGNISE STRESS

There are a number of warning signs that let you know you are getting stressed. These include:

- Tense or stiff muscles.
- Headaches.
- Irritability or anger.
- Disturbed sleep.
- Tiredness.
- Problems concentrating.
- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to keep up with everything.
- Stomach upsets or diarrhoea.
- Skin reactions such as rashes or pimples.
- Repeated infections or viruses.



HOW TO REDUCE STRESS

▼ Consider Some Lifestyle Changes

Stress can be a sign that you are trying to do too much. If this is the case, you may need to make some changes to your lifestyle. Try to reduce demands by decreasing your workload, sharing responsibility for chores and child care, politely saying *No* if people ask you to do too much, and getting support from friends and family. If your child's behaviour concerns you, seek help about the problem, rather than allowing it to continue.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and regular exercise (at least 20 minutes, three times a week). This can help prevent swings in your mood or energy levels. Each day, try to make time to do at least one thing you enjoy doing by yourself — half an hour can make all the difference. With children around this can be difficult, but try as best you can.

HOW TO MANAGE DAILY STRESS

▼ Notice Tension

When you feel stressed, your muscles get tight and tense and it gets harder to pay attention to what you are supposed to be doing. Try to notice where your body gets tense. Is it in your shoulders, neck, jaw, or other parts of your body? As soon as you notice tension in your body, do something about it. You will find it is easier to deal with stress when it first starts.

▼ Learn to Relax

As muscle tension is a sign of stress, relaxation techniques that reduce physical tension work well because they stop the stress cycle. There are many different ways of relaxing your mind and body. It is up to you to decide what works for you. Here are some suggestions:

- **Breathing.** Take some slow, deep breaths. Breathe in slowly through your nose, deep into your lungs. As you breathe in, it may help to imagine you are filling a balloon in your stomach. When you have taken a full breath, pause for a moment and then breathe out slowly through your nose or mouth. Be sure to let out all

the air. As you breathe out, allow your whole body to just let go. You can even imagine your arms and legs going loose like a rag doll. Keep your breathing smooth, slow and regular. Each time you breathe out you may like to say *Relax* or *Calm* or *Let go* or any other relaxing word or phrase, silently to yourself.

- **Muscle relaxation.** Try to relax through the day by loosening up any tense muscles. To get started, find a quiet spot where you are not going to be interrupted. Get comfortable by loosening your clothes, removing your shoes, and taking off your glasses if you wear them. Sit with your legs uncrossed, your feet flat on the floor, your head held straight and your hands resting on your thighs. The aim is to tighten then relax each part of your body while keeping the rest of your body relaxed. When you tense one part, feel the build up of tension, hold for 10 seconds and notice where it is particularly tense. Release the tension in that part slowly so you can identify the muscles that are relaxing and notice how it feels, then relax for 20 seconds and enjoy the pleasant feeling. Follow this routine for each part of your body. Clench or tense each muscle once. If an area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times. Work through each muscle from your forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, tongue, jaw, lips, neck, hands and arms, shoulders, back, chest, stomach, bottom, to your legs and feet.
- **Imagination.** Distract yourself by thinking of a pleasant, happy memory or an exciting event coming up. You may like to imagine a peaceful scene where you feel relaxed and happy, such as a favourite holiday place. Try to imagine what you can see, hear, feel, taste and smell.

There are many other things you can try, such as exercise, a warm bath, meditation, or listening to relaxing music. Find a relaxation technique that works for you. Once you choose a technique, practise it every day for at least 2 weeks. This will help you learn to relax as easily as you tense up, and you can use your relaxation any time

you start to feel stressed. To be able to do this well, you will need to practise.

▼ Develop Some Coping Statements

In stressful situations, you may find yourself saying negative things about yourself or the situation, over and over in your mind. The things you say to yourself do not have to make you more stressed, they can help calm you down. Coping statements tell you that you can cope with the situation you are in and with how you feel. You may find it easier to cope with stressful situations by thinking of helpful things to say to yourself, such as *I can do this* or *Stay calm* or *I've got through this before* or *Just relax*.

Coping statements can be useful in any stressful situation, such as driving home in heavy traffic, dealing with the busy time after arriving home from work, and preparing for situations when you think your child may misbehave, such as shopping or visiting.

Here are some examples of coping statements:

- *I can do this, I've done it before.*
- *It's OK to make mistakes.*
- *I'm feeling nervous — that's natural — but I can cope with this feeling.*
- *Sitting and worrying about it doesn't help, it makes me feel worse — what are some helpful things I can do instead?*
- *Just breathe deeply and relax.*
- *It will be over soon.*
- *I did it — I dealt with it and felt a lot more comfortable than before.*
- *Next time I won't have to worry so much.*

It is important to have your own coping statements that you believe and can use whenever you feel stress. Think of some helpful things you can say to yourself before, as you enter, during and after a stressful situation. You may like to use some from the list above, but you should also add some of your own, more personal ones. You may like to write them down and keep them somewhere handy so you can look at them when needed.

▼ Catch Unhelpful Thoughts

When you are feeling stressed, unhelpful thoughts may go through your mind.

You may find they just pop into your mind without warning. Unhelpful thoughts are often believable at the time, but may seem unrealistic, exaggerated or even silly if you think about them later. Here are some examples — *I can't cope with this* or *They never do as I say* or *He did that just to get at me* or *I'm a terrible parent* or *It's all my fault*.

Try to catch thoughts that make you feel more stressed or upset. This can take some practice. One way to do this is to write down your feelings and then try to remember the thoughts that made you feel that way.

▼ Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

When you catch an exaggerated, unhelpful thought that increases your stress and makes you feel worse, such as *I can't do anything right*, you can also try to challenge or debate it with yourself until you reach a more realistic or helpful way of thinking about the situation, such as *I've managed well for most of the day, but bath time and preparing dinner have been a struggle. Tomorrow I'll bath the children earlier*.

To challenge unhelpful thoughts you can ask yourself whether what you are saying to yourself is true — is there any evidence?, you can look for other explanations for the situation, or you can ask yourself what you would say to a friend in the same situation. You may find it easier to simply replace the unhelpful thought with one of your coping statements.

Remember, it will take time and effort to catch your unhelpful thoughts and

challenge them with more realistic and helpful thoughts, but this will be time and effort well spent. With practice, you will find that you begin to challenge unhelpful thoughts quickly and easily.

▼ Develop a Coping Plan

You can combine all of these ideas into a personal coping plan. Think of a stressful situation — it may help to think of a recent situation in which you found it difficult to stay calm. Work out what you could do and think to prepare yourself before entering the situation, what you could do and think as you go into the situation, what you could do and think to stay calm during the situation, and how to review and congratulate yourself afterwards. Include coping statements and relaxation strategies that you can use with your positive parenting strategies. You can develop plans like these for any situations you think might be stressful. It is also important

FOR FURTHER HELP See the *Positive Parenting* booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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to recognise there are some things you cannot control and that it is alright to make mistakes.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

If you or your partner often feel very stressed, find it difficult to stay calm, or have trouble coping, seek professional advice. Professionals who have skills in stress management can help you reduce any unnecessary stress in your life and develop some coping skills for everyday stress.

KEY STEPS

- Think about helpful changes you can make to your lifestyle.
- Try to notice tension early.
- Find a relaxation technique that suits you and use it when you feel tense.
- Think of coping statements to say to yourself before, as you enter, during and after a stressful situation.
- Make sure you believe what you are saying to yourself.
- Catch and challenge any unhelpful thoughts that increase your stress and replace them with more realistic or helpful ways of thinking about the situation.
- Develop a coping plan of helpful thoughts and actions for any stressful situations you know are coming up — include coping statements, relaxation strategies and positive parenting strategies.