

STRESS

Taking Charge

All About Stress

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. With Kim finally off to college, his promotion to foreman, and his wife's new job, they have all they've been waiting for. Ron thinks he should feel on top of the world, but that's not the case.



Change Comes from Within Families

At each new stage of life, expected and normal changes occur in families, and can result in stress. Changes, whether they seem good or bad, involve readjustment and often some loss. Sometimes expectations about the results of a change are unrealistic. It's stressful to find that what happens is different than what was expected.

Unexpected changes such as death, disabling injury or illness, divorce, and job loss can turn life upside down. Readjustment can be slow and painful.

Handling a stressful event well depends on:

- How severe the event is and how long it lasts
- What one has learned from past experiences
- How family members relate to and support each other
- How much support comes from friends and the community
- The level of financial resources and skills available within the family

Influence of Outside Changes

Changes in the world can threaten one's sense of order and security, and require one to learn new skills, accept what seems unacceptable, or take in more information than what is manageable. Outside changes may include:

- Natural disasters
- Political and economic trends
- Restructuring or technological changes at work

Change creates new opportunities, but also may involve losing:

- Comfort of daily routines
- Sense of being useful, skilled, or needed
- Presence and companionship of loved ones
- Dreams for a future now changed
- Health
- Security or confidence

What Happens under Too Much Stress?

Most of the time automatic physical reactions take over during everyday hassles, problems, worries, or crises. In an emergency these automatic stress responses help people act quickly. Automatic changes in body chemistry, heart rate, and blood pressure tense the body for action and resistance. As the threat is resolved, human bodies adapt and return to normal function.

Many life stressors continue for such a long time that they aren't recognized as sources of stress. Over time the constant physical and emotional adaptations to these stressors can take a toll. Physical or emotional symptoms, changes in behavior, or changes in mental health can be signals of living with too much stress.

Rene's job gets harder as her company hires fewer people. She feels resentment and anger at her boss. Even though she takes work home at night and often gets little sleep, she says "yes" whenever she's asked to take on another task. She's been sick a lot this year.



What Is Known about Managing Stress?

We can't eliminate all stress, but we can find ways to reduce it. Below are ideas that may help.

- Do something about one small part of a problem.
- Exercise to relieve physical and emotional symptoms.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Take time to meditate.
- Eat well and avoid drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.
- Accept change as part of life.

Barriers to Managing Stress

Even when a change is needed, it's hard to take the steps that might help. Anxiety, worry, lack of time, and too many responsibilities make taking charge seem impossible. The more stressors that come, the more the symptoms of stress prevent people from taking charge.

Behaviors that can prevent people from making changes that can lessen stress include:

- Trying to solve too many problems at once makes change overwhelming.
- Blaming others, "the system," or "fate" prevents action.
- Letting stressors build up affects our judgment and initiative.
- Using drugs or alcohol instead of resolving problems increases stress.
- Believing nothing can change ensures that nothing will change.

Ideas for Managing Stress

- Focus on what you and your family do well.
- Positive relationships can help lessen the impact of stressful events.
- Practice appreciative communication as a family. Each person deserves to be listened to.
- Take care of your health—a protective factor in stressful times.
- Strengthen spiritual resources.
- Let your values drive your choices.
- Delay taking on new commitments.
- Strengthen your money and time management skills.
- Reach out to others for support.

Take charge of stress by paying attention to the symptoms below.

Physical

- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Appetite or weight changes
- Changes in sleep habits
- Frequency of fatigue or illness

Emotional

- Anger or irritability
- Sadness (crying spells)
- Anxiety or lack of direction
- Discouragement
- Hyperactivity
- Search for magic solutions

Behavioral

- Increased drug or alcohol use
- Reduced concentration
- Postponed decisions
- Reduced productivity
- Increased forgetfulness
- Frequent boredom

Relationships

- Intolerance of others
- Avoidance of friends
- Nagging
- Drop in sex drive
- Loneliness
- Resentment

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Managing Farm Business and Family Stress

If you are part of a business, stress has always been part of your job description. While a certain amount of stress is unavoidable and usually manageable, too much stress can hurt both physical and mental health. Recognizing stress overload early in yourself or your business associates can help you take steps to minimize its harmful effects.

Because your business is unique, the way you experience and react to stress differs from the way your neighbors experience stress. Even if your business can withstand major financial fluctuations, you and your co-workers may still have to adjust expectations, dreams and goals to fit new realities.

Symptoms of stress

It helps to be aware of symptoms of stress in yourself or a co-worker. You might notice an increase in physical signs such as headaches, lingering fatigue, disrupted sleep patterns and more frequent illness.

Although you might think a co-worker may just have a problem getting along with people, his or her frequent anger and irritability could be emotional symptoms of excessive stress. Inability to relax, discouragement and a sense of futility also commonly result from prolonged stress.

It's important to separate the original problems or causes of stress from the resulting symptoms. Over time, stress can result in low productivity, increased use of drugs or alcohol, forgetfulness, marital or other relationship problems, loneliness and resentment.

Managing stress

Once individuals recognize symptoms of stress overload, how should they manage it? It's unrealistic to think you can eliminate stress, but there are ways to reduce the impacts. These tactics have been helpful

to many people during particularly stressful times:

- Do something about one small piece of a bigger problem.
- Ask for help from family, friends or community resources.
- Use exercise to reduce symptoms of stress.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Protect physical health by eating well and avoiding alcohol or drugs.
- Work on accepting change as a natural part of life.

Barriers to managing stress

Unfortunately, reactions to stress overload can make it difficult to take steps that might help. Too much responsibility can make it seem almost impossible to take charge. Below are barriers that can block change.

- Trying to solve too many problems at once
- Blaming others or not recognizing the degree of control we do have
- Letting stress affect our judgment
- Using drugs or alcohol as substitutes for solving the problems
- Having a negative outlook

Strengthen relationships

Take these actions to help yourself during stressful times and to strengthen personal and family relationships.

- Increase the time spent with supportive family and friends, who are important buffers in times of stress.
- Practice positive communication with loved ones by listening and expressing appreciation.

- Make personal health a priority, because it is essential for coping with stress.
- Strengthen spiritual resources.
- Be mindful of what is most important to oneself and one's family.
- Remain aware of ongoing changes that contribute to stress, and postpone new commitments if they will add stress.
- Enhance money and time management skills.
- Reach out to people in the community. Being there for others strengthens one's own circle of support.
- Be empathetic. We cannot know how the individual feels unless we have been there. Avoid one-upmanship.
- Try to separate the problem's causes from the symptoms. Assist the individual in recognizing the difference. As the saying goes, "sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees," especially when we're in the middle of the forest.
- Try to help the individual think logically and rationally. Jotting things down on a yellow note pad and prioritizing them can do wonders. Keep it simple.
- Encourage the individual to get back into a routine of doing things. Stress often brings on apathy and a loss of interest in things formerly enjoyed.
- Learn to recognize the signs of stress. There are many excellent publications available.
- Above all, make sure the individual retains ownership of his/her problems. If you pick up the other person's problem, you both have a problem and you lose your objectivity.

Help co-worker and business associates cope with stress

What can you do to help others cope more effectively? Here are nine points to assist you in relating to individuals experiencing stress.

- Take time to listen. Stressed individuals should not be rushed. By taking the time to listen, you are showing that you care. Ask questions so you clearly understand the problem. By asking questions, the individual must respond to you in a manner that helps them frame and understand their own problem.
- Be non-critical and non-judgmental as the individual shares his/her troubles. While their problem may not seem huge to you, it is to them.
- Counsel on a one-on-one basis. Be a good listener - don't interrupt. Try to draw them out. Get them to talk. This can be a tremendous pressure reliever.

Dealing with stress often calls for professional help that is beyond your capacity regardless of how sincere you may be. When this happens, suggest that the individual seek professional help. In lesser situations, just being a caring, empathetic, supportive, and unhurried listener can go a long way in helping an individual through a difficult situation.

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Families in Tough Times

What is Stress?

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Reviewed by Rose Allen, Family Relations Extension Educator

Stress may be caused by major life events and transitions but is also caused by daily hassles, worries and demands. Stress is highly individualized and as such, what is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another. It is important that you are able to identify your sources of stress. Most stressors fall into one of the types of stress listed below.

Types of Stress

- General time/no time stress
- Anxiety-for-others stress
- Work stress
- Environmental stress
- Family/relationship stress
- Social stress
- Financial stress
- Emptiness stress
- Health stress
- Too-much-to-do stress
- Housing stress
- Too-little-to-do stress

Symptoms of Stress

Just as a flashing red light in your dashboard warns that something is wrong with the car's engine, we all display warning signs when we experience stress. These signs and symptoms allow you to recognize when you or others are stressed and may include symptoms such as:

Muscle tension

Headaches

Memory problems

Restlessness

Concentration difficulties

Tiredness

Sleep problems

Impatience

Irritation

Anxiety

Nausea/stomach problems

Dissatisfaction

Depression

Alcohol or drug abuse

Managing stress

You may not be able to get rid of all sources of stress in your life but there are strategies you can use to help cope with and manage stress.

1. Take care of your physical health by exercising, eating well, and getting an adequate amount of sleep.
2. Manage and restrict the amount of stress in life by utilizing time management skills and setting limits.
3. Attend to your mental health by making time to relax, engaging in positive thinking, and including pleasant distractions into your day.
4. Surround yourself with sources of support. Enjoy time with a friend whether venting frustrations, listening to words of encouragement, or spending time laughing together.

It is important to remember that not all stress is bad and that moderate levels of stress, when managed effectively, is actually healthy. Tolerable levels of stress may provide a challenge that increases productivity. Studies have shown that short-lived bouts of stress may boost your immune system.

SOURCE(S):

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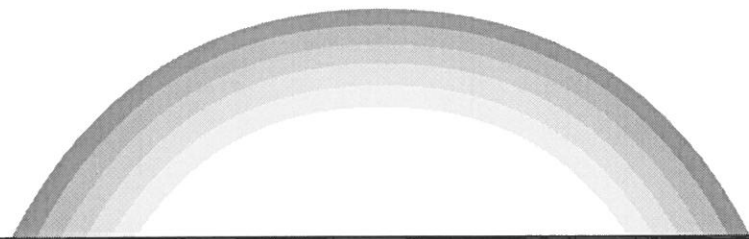
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You may also be interested in resources for dealing with stress, or resources aimed at farm families or disaster recovery. See other recommended resources for resources beyond Extension.

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Disaster Recovery



Strengthen your relationship in stressful times

Money worries can lead to emotional stress and even affect a person's physical health. People may have different reactions to financial hardship. If a person reacts to stress by being more negative, hostile, or irritable toward his/her partner, she/he may feel a loss of affection and satisfaction with the relationship.

- ✦ Men more than women tend to show hostile feelings toward their partners as a result of money pressures.
- ✦ Women are more likely to react with anger to a partner's negative behavior than to money problems.
- ✦ Both partners may mistake each other's real feelings.
- ✦ When money is tight and the family faces uncertainty and hardship, both partners need to talk about how they are feeling.

- ✦ Finding ways to show love and affection toward each other builds strength to get through tough times.

Remember to show affection and talk things over together.

Prepared by extension specialists at Iowa State University.

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Encouraging Family Communication after a Disaster

Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Families During Difficult Times

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Good family communication is necessary to effectively work together to prevent or respond to crises. This fact sheet offers ways of developing communication skills that help families not only to survive crises, but also to improve their daily lives. It provides helpful ways to think about communication, explains why family communication is sometimes difficult, and shows how family members of all ages can increase their well-being through family meetings by applying simple rules for good communication.

But We're a Family--of Course We Communicate!

We talk and write to friends, co-workers and family members all the time. But special attention needs to be paid to communication during times of family change or community disaster. If it's easier to communicate respectfully and clearly with people you hardly know than with your own family members, or if communicating under stress feels overwhelming, or even if you feel your family communicates well already, this fact sheet may be of interest.

It can indeed be hard to communicate calmly with the people who share our roof and responsibilities and in whom we have invested a great deal of ourselves. Adding to the difficulties of family communication are the strong emotions that relying on each other brings. Even within the same family, the definition of good or clear communication may differ for family members of different generations, cultures, ages, or gender. Furthermore, in a crisis or disaster we may not feel sure of ourselves and how or if we should share our feelings (e.g., fear, anger, sorrow) and thoughts (e.g. of blame, hope, problem-solving). This fact sheet can help you improve your existing communication skills and gain new ones to weather normal family changes and crises.

Communication Skills

Both listening and speaking are necessary to successfully communicate. Listening gives you valuable information about your family. The information your loved ones share should not be ignored, even if you dislike what or how it is said. At times, a family member in crisis may pull away from you. Part of good communication is the ability to accept temporary withdrawal or silence, as even this silence can be informative to you and helpful to your family member. Likewise, speaking up and clearly stating what you feel and think is an important part of coping with your family's immediate needs in daily life and in a crisis. Communication also keeps us connected to family and community. Being connected helps ground us in reality and reduces the stress we feel due to crises and daily hassles.

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This information has been reviewed by university faculty.
ag.arizona.edu/pubs/health/az1341F.pdf

Crisis Planning and Prevention Require Communication

Crises come in all shapes and sizes. Communication skills, planning, and practice in dealing with smaller crises can help families cope with larger problems. The following are examples of crises and the communication issues they may raise:

- War and terrorism may require rapid and planned emergency responses. They may also result in difficult discussions with children or family disagreement on political issues.
- Major illness is often unexpected, but requires substantial ongoing planning, and the sharing of emotions and concerns after the initial shock of the illness or disability.
- The impact of job loss can be prepared for through education and savings, but these preparations may bring on their own family crises about how to handle family duties and income.
- Natural disasters may bring neighbors and community resources to us, but these supports may leave before we have experienced a full recovery from our loss.
- Family changes (separation, death, adoption or its disruption, loss of a pregnancy) may or may not bring friends closer to us. In such cases, families may choose to be more private than usual in their communications. These events put as much or more stress on a family than events such as hurricanes, which are seen as beyond any human's fault or control.
- The developmental transitions of both children and adults can be disruptive. For example, adjustment is required when children enter adolescence or when adults enter retirement age. These normal changes are also often seen as family crises due to the conflicts they may create. While all families experience these changes, we may feel alone as we go through them. Such changes demand our best communication skills. Often these "normal" crises bring critical comments from well-meaning friends, relatives and even from ourselves. Clear and open communication helps teens, elders and adults weather the normal changes that shape and reshape families.
- Family violence and substance abuse can disrupt any family. Frank discussion,

willingness to seek help, and speaking up and listening to others without judging them are essential to responding to these common problems. Communication without judging allows others to be open and seek our help.

Don't wait until a crisis before learning and sharing what communication styles and tools work for you and your family. In preparing families for change or crisis, it is best to practice communication skills. One way to develop skills for good communication is to have regular family meetings.

Family Meetings

Family meetings are a simple but very useful way to help families deal with their concerns. In these meetings work on goals and problems alike, but begin with issues you know will go smoothly as you work out the how-to's of your communication (e.g. time and place; show respect even when you disagree). By meeting regularly, you will get used to sharing feelings, reaching out for support, writing down plans, and coming to consensus (waiting to act until everybody agrees). Most experts and families agree that practicing communication takes time and may even feel a little awkward or "fake" at first, but it will feel more natural and the time will feel well spent as your skills improve. Simple planning and ground-rules make family meetings a success:

- Begin your first family meetings with items dealing with fun or praise. First make them fun; then deal with business. Organize the meeting so that it is not too long. Lengthy meetings may get boring. Let everyone speak. Take turns playing the roles of focus-keeper, note-taker and time-watcher.
- Family meetings during or after a crisis work best if they have been a family routine. Develop a tradition that starts and ends the meeting—traditions anchor us in storms of crisis.
- Use consensus—base a final decision on what everyone has agreed to or can live with.
- Make sure every family member feels welcome to attend the meetings but does not feel forced to attend.
- Use "I"-sentences (speak from your own heart) and avoid placing blame; take a break when tempers flare.

- Keep to one topic at a time. Summarize the discussion.
- End each meeting with something fun or affectionate.

Skills developed in family meetings will help your family cope with disaster and normal family changes. In daily life, family meetings are a great place to set new family rules and share feelings and concerns. In a crisis, skills developed in regular family meetings will help us feel connected to each other and to reality, and will help us communicate.

Communication in a Crisis

When we are in a crisis, we are bound to feel stressed. The following strategies have been shown to help individuals communicate more effectively when they are under stress:

- Learn your stress signals and those of your family members. Stress signals are the warning lights of anger and “shut down”. They include such non-verbal cues as feeling hot, looking away, etc.
- Be honest, but say what you need to with care, tact, and courtesy while remaining focused on the issue at hand.
- Think through your problem before you speak; get all the facts.
- Listen, take turns, lead when necessary, and hear without interrupting or criticizing.
- Check your interpretations of what others are telling you. Don’t assume anything.

Using these tips will help each person in your family to communicate what help he or she needs and can offer to others.

Children

Crises may affect each member of a family differently. Each person’s resources (e.g., communication skills, knowledge, money, experience, friends, faith) and roles (parent, child, elder, spouse, partner) play a part in how they will respond and communicate to others in the family and community. Children often make good problem solvers and rise to the occasion, although they need to be kept informed and supported with clear and caring communication. These tips have been found to be especially helpful to children (and work with most adults as well):

- Involve children in family meetings based on their age and ability to understand.
- Discuss the family’s needs and the child’s role in helping to meet those needs.
- Provide simple, honest answers to questions.
- Listen without judging or criticizing the child’s worries.
- Make clear statements of confidence in the family’s ability to survive the crisis.

Summary

In a crisis, you will want to understand others and have them understand you. You will want to know if your partner’s or child’s silence means agreement, fear or something else. Becoming aware of communication roadblocks (blocking out information, ignoring warning signs, placing blame or losing control of your temper) and effective communication styles help families in times of crisis. Tips for keeping communication clear include:

- Have regular family meetings before, during, and after crises.
- Help family members share what makes for good communication for them.
- Be sure to listen, as advice is not always appropriate—sometimes a good listener is all we need. Use “I” statements, and encourage others to do the same. Work towards consensus. Be honest but polite.
- Learn your stress signals. Clearly state both what you need and what you can do to help.
- Check to see if you were understood— don’t leave room for guessing and bad feelings based on misunderstanding. Remember, every person, even a child, has something important to contribute.
- Keep breathing and do not sit too long; we were made to go forward.

Crises come and go, but when we communicate clearly and respectfully with those we love, when we reach out to give and get help, we are better able to deal with present and future crises. Developing our family communication skills can even help us to enjoy family life more.

Internet Resources

Supporting Families Following a Disaster: The University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Cooperative Extension has designed this series of fact sheets covering special needs of families during difficult times. http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

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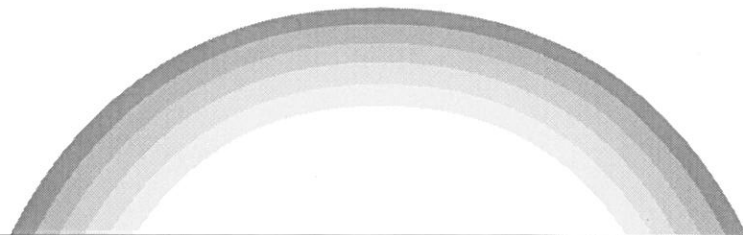
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Disaster Recovery



Show You Care By Listening

Most people think listening is easy. However, really listening—not only to the words but also to the meaning behind the words—is hard work. The hard work of listening often is the best help we can offer to a person in trouble or under mental strain. The following ideas can help you sharpen your listening skills and offer support to others.

1. Listening is an active process. It is not only hearing; it is actively trying to understand and feel another person's concerns.

2. Listeners should talk less than the speaker. When you're actively listening, give the speaker your full attention. Keep the focus on what you hear and what you see. If you don't know what to say, don't say anything. Silence is a response in itself. It gives the speaker an open door to elaborate, clarify, or reflect.

3. When you respond, focus on the speaker. You can paraphrase what you've heard, identify the feelings you've heard, or state the feelings you experienced while listening. Even though you may have had a similar experience, it's better not to spend time telling your story. Keep the talk and the attention focused on the speaker, not the listener.

4. Avoid trying to cheer up the person. Phrases like "things could be worse" or "there's a silver lining in every cloud" are apt to make the person think you don't understand.

5. Even if you have had a similar experience, you never can fully know how another person is feeling. Saying "I know how you feel" is not accurate and may make another person less likely to share.

6. Don't make promises you can't keep. "Things will get better" is a promise you have no control over. It's unfair to promise what you can't control.

You can, however, briefly share a time when hope returned to you even after the situation looked hopeless. You also can share your confidence that the person has the power to make it through the difficult situation with the help of others.

7. Use open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer. "How" questions are better than "why" questions.

8. Avoid advice. What is important is that the speaker tell his or her story and identify personal feelings. Do not make suggestions or do problem solving unless the person asks for your ideas. If your suggestions are requested, help the person identify options, rather than give advice.

9. Avoid judgment. Even praise can be viewed as judgment. It may seem that if you have the right to praise, you also have the right to criticize. Good communication ends when judgment begins.

10. Don't feel you need to solve the problem—you may not be able to do anything to solve it. Listening often is all we can do, and sometimes, it is the most important thing we should do.

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