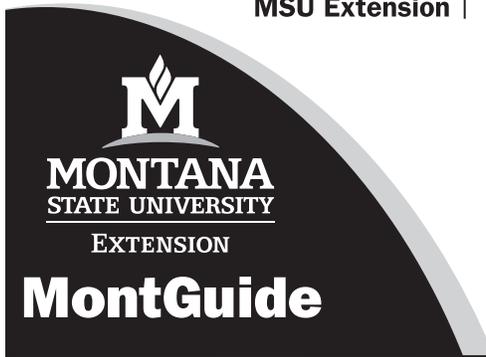


Handling Challenging Times



by Sandra J. Bailey, Ph.D., CFLE, MSU Extension Family & Human Development Specialist, and Ramona Marotz-Baden, Ph.D., Professor, MSU Department of Health & Human Development, retired

Everyone experiences life's ups and downs. But sometimes we get hit with challenges that really test our ability to handle life. This guide will discuss how stress impacts the entire family and provides ideas on how to better handle challenging times.

MT200210HR Reprinted 5/09

STRESS IS THE BODY'S REACTION TO THE CHANGING

demands of life. It is part of life for everyone and moderate amounts of stress are good! Stress motivates us to get things done. Stress is caused by a variety of factors. Daily hassles in life – such as getting a parking or speeding ticket, having a bad day at work or staying up all night with a sick child – cause stress.

Major happy events – such as graduations, weddings or getting a new job – may also be stressful. Significant negative events also cause stress: the death of a loved one, divorce or a severe accident. There is no escaping – we all experience stress.

Children also experience stress. Signs of stress that may appear in young children include whining or crying more often, having temper tantrums, regressing to earlier behaviors and needing more attention from caring adults. Older children may argue more with siblings, become angry more easily, withdraw, and grades may drop.

Stress affects the entire family

Think about the family as a mobile that hangs over an infant's crib. If we touch one part of the mobile, then the rest of it moves. The same thing occurs with stress.

If one family member is experiencing stress, the others will be affected. We can't hide it from one another. Being aware of how stress is affecting each family member is important.

How families process stress

How stress affects us

Having an understanding of what happens in the process of stress may help you and your family manage stress in a more positive way.

First, there is the event or situation, called a stressor, which throws us off balance. Until we change to meet the demands of the new event or situation, we will feel stressed. Sometimes this is very easy, as in reorganizing your day or week. Other times we can't adjust easily. The events or situations come too rapidly, or we don't have resources to deal with them. The stressors pile up and what we experience is an accumulation of stress.

An example is a job loss. Because of lost income, the family may get behind on mortgage payments. Both parents may need to work outside the home, and the job loss may prevent the children from participating in activities due to cost. All of these stressors pile up.

How your body tells you about stress

While everyone may experience various signs of stress from time to time, if they continue to occur, think about what might be going on in your life. Symptoms may include:

- Feeling tired all the time
- Inability to concentrate
- Laughing or crying for no reason
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Muscle tension
- Increased alcohol or tobacco use
- Changes in sleeping or eating
- Being forgetful
- Feeling anxious
- Withdrawal
- Sweaty palms
- Loss of temper
- Experiencing marital problems
- Experiencing frequent physical illnesses
- Tension headaches
- Constipation or diarrhea

Combine this with the daily stressors we all face, and the stress becomes more intense. Stressor pile-up can cause us to blow up over a seemingly small problem. The small problem isn't the issue, the problem is the cumulative effect of all of the stressors.

Much depends on your point of view

The second part of the stress process is our perception of the event or situation and how we believe we can get through it. Families and individuals handle stressful events differently. Some people seem to take things in stride and don't get upset when faced with challenges. Others become very tense and are unable to effectively deal with the problem.

Some families pull together to face stressful situations, while members of other families distance themselves from one another.

How we perceive a stressor impacts our success in getting through it. Those who believe they can manage, eliminate or modify the stressor handle stress better. Those who see the stressor as an opportunity for growth also handle stress better.

Tools we use to cope with stress

The next part of the stress process is how we react and adapt. We rely on our existing resources to get through tough times. For example, if it is a financial crisis, we may draw upon a savings account. Family members may rely on their faith to help them through the stressful time. Drawing upon our existing resources may eliminate or reduce stress. Some resources include:

- Time
- Money
- Insurance
- Skills such as carpentry or budgeting
- Previous experience
- Education
- Family and community support

If our existing resources aren't enough, we may need to find new resources to help us out. For example, parents may need to take on additional jobs to make financial ends meet. Accepting help from the local food bank or energy assistance program may be a short-term resource.

As a family works through a severe challenge, changes take place within the family. How well a family can adapt to change depends on the individuals and the family as a whole. Families actually can become stronger as the result of dealing with significant challenge.

Managing Individual Stress

The first place to start in managing stress is with yourself. In order to assist others you need to be healthy and able to handle situations in a positive manner. Here are some ideas that may assist you in managing your stress.

Be realistic – When feeling overwhelmed don't try to do everything. Can you ask someone to help?

Focus on one thing at a time – Make a list of what needs to get done. Prioritize the list and focus on one task at a time.

Exercise – Regular exercise is one way many people relieve stress. Walk the dog. Go on a hike.

Hobbies – Take a break and do something you enjoy. Read a book. Work on a car. Create something with wood. Do some sewing. Play music. Look at family photo albums from a great vacation.

Laugh – Have a sense of humor. Find time to have fun and laugh with friends and family. Watch a funny television show or movie. Avoid taking things too seriously.

Visualize – Think about how you might handle the situation more successfully. Ask a friend for ideas if you are not sure of how to do something differently.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle – Try to have a balance of work and fun. Eat well, cut down on caffeine and high sugar foods and avoid alcohol and drugs. Get enough sleep.

Help another – Do something nice for someone else. Visit with an elderly neighbor who lives alone. Sometimes our problems become more manageable when we see others in need. Doing something for another person can help our mood.

Use moderation – Think about what your weekly schedule is like. Do you have too many activities? Build in some time to relax.

Talk to others – When you are concerned about something, talk it over with trusted friends or family members. Talking about a concern often helps it seem like less of a problem.

Recognizing stress and getting the help you need

Experiencing stress is part of life. Learning to recognize and manage stress during tough times can help you get through it.

However, if you feel like you are worrying too much or are experiencing the stress indicators mentioned earlier, talk to someone. Talk to your family health care provider, pastor, or mental health counselor. You might need some extra help with your stress.

Getting help for yourself is the best thing you can do for your entire family. To find a mental health counselor in your area, check the resources at the Web site of the Montana Mental Health Association at <http://www.MontanaMentalHealth.org/> If you don't have internet access, you can contact the association at 877-927-MMHA (6642).

References

- Blonna, R. (2002). *Coping with stress in a changing world* (2nd Ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill Publishing.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach*, (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Galvin, K. M. & Brommel, B. J. (2000). *Family communication: Cohesion and change*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- McKenry, P. C. & Price, S. J. (2000). Families coping with problems and change. In P. C. McKenry & S. J. Price (Eds.) *Families and change: Coping with stressful events and transitions*. (pp. 1-21). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Olson, D. H. & DeFrain, J. (1997). *Marriage and the family: Diversity and strengths*. (pp. 443-473). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.
- Walker, L. S. & Walker, J. L. (1988). Stressors and symptoms predictive of distress in farmers. In R. Marotz-Baden & C. B. Hennon, (Eds.), *Families in Rural America: Stress, Adaptation and Revitalization*. (pp. 56-63). St. Paul, MN: National Council on Family Relations.

Acknowledgements

- Judy Johnson, Richland County Extension Agent, Montana State University Extension.
- Peggy Amaral-Lombard, former Park County Extension Agent, Montana State University Extension.
- Denise Seilstad, Fergus County Extension Agent, Montana State University Extension.
- Jennifer Wells, Hill County Extension Agent, Montana State University Extension.

Positive strategies for handling stress

According to research, families who handle challenges and stress in a positive manner use the following strategies. A family does not need to use all of the strategies listed to successfully handle stressful times.

Have open communication with family members – The stress is affecting everyone in the family, therefore talking and listening to one another can help the family through the tough time.

Be flexible – Family members have different roles and expectations. During stressful times some of those roles need to change. For example, if a fulltime homemaker starts working outside the home, the rest of the family may need to pitch in and help with household tasks.

Stick together – Families who feel that they are connected to each other do better in handling difficult times. Members feel they can rely on one another to help them through a challenging period. Make a point to keep family activities a priority.

Gain information/resources – Find out more about the resources available in your community to help with the challenges you are facing. Get information from your library, Extension Service, or from the Internet.

Seek help and support from others – Reaching out can be difficult for families, but those who do reach out in a time of need are better able to handle the stress and avoid a crisis. Neighbors, other family members, or community resources may be able to provide you with the support you need.

Maintain faith/spirituality – Having a sense of spirituality gives us the inner strength needed to handle tough times. For some people this may mean active participation in a religious organization. For others it may mean taking a walk to reflect.

Develop family member autonomy – While family members need to be connected, each needs to feel a sense of independence. This helps each one realize that he/she has some control and the ability to be a part of the solution to help the family through rough times.



To order additional publications, please contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office, visit our online catalog at www.msuextension.org/publications.asp or e-mail orderpubs@montana.edu

Copyright © 2009 MSU Extension

We encourage the use of this document for nonprofit educational purposes. This document may be reprinted for nonprofit educational purposes if no endorsement of a commercial product, service or company is stated or implied, and if appropriate credit is given to the author and MSU Extension. To use these documents in electronic formats, permission must be sought from the Extension Communications Coordinator, 115 Culbertson Hall, Montana State University, Bozeman MT 59717; E-mail: publications@montana.edu

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Montana State University and Montana State University Extension prohibit discrimination in all of their programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital and family status. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Douglas L. Steele, Vice Provost and Director, Montana State University Extension, Bozeman, MT 59717.



File under: Family and Human Development (Mental Health)
Reprint May 2009 1000-509SA