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Helpful Hints for Handling Stress

If you're a parent, you know how quickly the pressures of raising children can turn into stress. The following tips can help you deal with the most common sources of stress and maintain a level head around your children.

Tip #1: Avoid Common Sources of Stress

Don't try to cram too many things into a single day. Unclutter your schedule *and* your life whenever possible. Teach your children that it's better to ask nicely than to scream or yell. Avoid too much caffeine or alcohol. Both of these are thought to be relaxing but they can actually make things worse. Avoid watching the news before going to bed if it upsets you. Spend less time worrying and more time living.

Tip #2: Plan Ahead and Stay Organized

Planning ahead is a key stress-reduction skill that all parents should learn. If you're able to anticipate the tantrum triggers, the leaving-the-house needs, and other potential stress traps, you'll find fewer crises in your daily life. If you plan ahead and streamline your routines, there's less fussing, forgetting things, and stressing as you move through your busy day.

Tip #3: Change Negative Attitudes into Positive Ones

Try to take one day at a time. Look for the good things that happen each day and be thankful. Reach out and speak to someone. Be forgiving. Don't hold grudges. No one is perfect and we all make mistakes. As you learn to forgive others, use a little on yourself. Try reciting the serenity prayer at least once a day:

*Grant me the courage to change the things I can change,
the ability to accept the things I cannot change,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Tip #4: Make Time for Your Inexpensive Stress Busters

Listening to music is very relaxing. Reading can be rewarding for many. Enjoying a hobby can make life more fun. Research has shown that exercising several times a week (even just a walk) can reduce stress and tension. Research has also found that regular church attendance and daily prayer result in lower blood pressure and better coping. Whatever works best for you, try to practice it regularly. After all, your kids are depending on you and they're worth it!

Tip #5: Try This Simple Deep Breathing Exercise

When we are tense, our breathing is often shallow and rapid. In fact, most of us do not breathe properly, tense or not. Improper breathing robs us of oxygen which purifies our body as well as helps our body produce energy.

Fortunately, learning to breathe properly is not difficult. Find a comfortable place to lie down. Place your hands on your abdomen just below your ribs. Begin breathing slowly and deeply. If you are breathing properly, you will feel the expansion in the abdominal area before your rib cage expands. Spend 5 to 10 minutes several times a day practicing your deep breathing. You will notice that as you become more proficient, your breathing will improve during your normal activities.

Tip #6: Take a Short “Mental Vacation”

When we think about things that are upsetting, our body tenses up. This is because the lower centers of our brain, which regulate body functions, do not distinguish between real images and those which are imagined. If you think about being in an uncomfortable situation, your body will begin to respond as if you were in that situation.

You already have lots of experience thinking about things that cause tension, but you *also* have all the skills necessary to do just the opposite. Taking short “mental vacation” can do wonders for your stress level.

Start by relaxing your muscles and taking a few deep breaths. Then close your eyes and imagine you are someplace you enjoy. It could be the beach or the mountains or enjoying a favorite activity. Try to fully experience this imagined event. See the sights. Hear the sounds. Feel the air. Smell the smells. Tune in to the sense of well-being.

At first, you should allow 10 to 15 minutes for this exercise. As you become more adept you will find that you can feel like you have been on a long vacation or just come back from a good time in just a few moments.

Tip #7: Use Progressive Relaxation

Progressive relaxation is an easy-to-learn skill that will pay big dividends over time. Here’s a quick lesson plan: Start with your feet and lower legs. Tighten those muscles just as hard as you can. Feel the tension. Then gradually release the tension. Let your feet and lower leg muscles relax just a little bit at a time. Repeat this with your upper leg and hip muscles. Again, experience first the tension and then the gradual relaxation as you slowly release all the tension.

Next, tense the muscles in your hands and lower arms. Make a fist. Tighten them as tight as you can. Then gradually let them relax. With each muscle group, the relaxation feels good. As you relax one group at a time your whole being will begin to feel relaxed, calm and peaceful. Repeat the tension and then gradual relaxation with your upper arms and shoulders. Remember to tense and hold before relaxing.

Next, tighten your stomach muscles. Hold the tension and then gradually release. Then, move to your chest muscles. Take a deep breath. Hold it while tensing your chest muscles. Gradually let out your breath while gradually letting go of the tension in your chest muscles.

As you have now progressively relaxed most of your major muscle groups, you may feel a tingling sensation. You will find that your breathing has become slower and deeper. You are now relaxed. Try to

practice on a daily basis. When you have used the method above for about 10 to 15 sessions, try it without tensing the muscles. See if you can just relax one muscle group at a time while breathing slowly and deeply.

Tip #8: Stay Connected

No matter how hectic your life is today, you need to stay connected with your friends and family members. Make a habit of reaching out to someone in your life on a daily basis, if only by telephone. Schedule time in advance for friendly meetings and social gatherings. Never be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Most people will be delighted to help out!

Tip #9: Take Care of Yourself

As you already know, if you aren't at your best physically and emotionally, you won't be your best for your kids. To maintain the kind of stamina required to keep up with kids all day, it's important for parents to care for themselves the way they care for their children: by getting plenty of sleep, healthy food, and at least some "down time." It's also important to enjoy positive feedback (in the form of hugs) to avoid burnout. (See these self care strategies for ideas.)

Tip #10: Share Some of the Burden with Others

Parents are often expected to do everything related to home care and child care, and that often leaves them with little time for self care. Make your job easier by enlisting help from the kids and your partner. Kids can Swiffer a floor, take out dishes, and help cook meals. Even young children can help with certain household tasks, like matching socks while you fold laundry. You can trade babysitting with friends.

52 Proven Stress Reducers

Read the list below and circle your five favorite stress reducers. Then start using them in your daily life. It takes about five months for a new habit to take hold, so give yourself plenty of time to practice these techniques and strategies. The investment is well worth the effort!

1. Get up fifteen minutes earlier in the morning. The inevitable morning mishaps will be less stressful.
2. Prepare for the morning the evening before. Set the breakfast table, make lunches, put out the clothes you plan to wear, etc.
3. Don't rely on your memory. Write down appointment times, when to pick up the laundry, when library books are due, etc. ("The palest ink is better than the most retentive memory." – Old Chinese Proverb)
4. Doing nothing which, after being done, leads you to tell a lie.
5. Make duplicates of all keys. Bury a house key in a secret spot in the garden and carry a duplicate car key in your wallet, apart from your key ring.
6. Practice preventive maintenance. Your car, appliances, home and relationships will be less likely to break down or fall apart at the worst possible moment.
7. Be prepared to wait. A paperback can make a wait in a post office line almost pleasant.

8. Procrastination is stressful Whatever you want to do tomorrow, do today; whatever you want to do today, do it now.
9. Plan ahead. Don't let the gas tank get below one-quarter full. Keep a well-stocked emergency shelf of home staples. Don't wait until you're down to your last bus token or postage stamp to buy more, etc.
10. Don't put up with something that doesn't work right. If your alarm clock, wallet, shoe laces, windshield wipers, whatever are a constant aggravation, get them fixed or get new ones.
11. Allow 15 minutes of extra time to get to appointments. Plan to arrive at an airport one hour before domestic departures.
12. Eliminate (or restrict) the amount of caffeine in your diet.
13. Always set up contingency plans, just in case. (Examples: "If for some reason either of us is delayed, here's what we'll do..." Or, "If we get split up in the shopping center, here's where we'll meet.")
14. Relax your standards. The world will not end if the grass doesn't get mowed this weekend.
15. Pollyanna-Power! For every one thing that goes wrong, there are probably 10 or 50 or 100 blessings. Count 'em!
16. Ask questions. Taking a few moments to repeat back directions, what someone expects of you, etc., can save hours. (The old "the hurrieder I go, the behinder I get," idea).
17. Learn how to say "No!" Saying "no" to extra projects, social activities, and invitations you know you don't have the time or energy for takes practice, self-respect, and a belief that everyone, everyday, needs quiet time to relax and be alone.
18. Unplug your phone. Want to take a long bath, meditate, sleep, or read without interruption? Drum up the courage to temporarily disconnect. (The possibility of there being a terrible emergency in the next hour or so is almost nil). Or use an answering machine.
19. Turn needs into preferences. Our basic physical needs translate into food, water, and keeping warm. Everything else is a preference. Don't get attached to preferences.
20. Simplify, simplify, simplify...
21. Make friends with non-worriers. Nothing can get you into the habit of worrying faster than associating with chronic worrywarts.
22. Get up and stretch periodically if your job requires that you sit for extended periods.
23. Wear earplugs. If you need to find quiet at home, pop in some earplugs.
24. Get enough sleep. If necessary, use an alarm clock to remind you to go to bed.
25. Create order out of chaos. Organize your home and workspace so that you always know exactly where things are. Put things away where they belong and you won't have to go through the stress of losing things.

26. When feeling stressed, most people tend to breathe in short, shallow breaths. When you breathe like this, stale air is not expelled, oxidation of the tissues is incomplete and muscle tension frequently results. Check your breathing throughout the day and before, during and after high pressure situations. If you find your stomach muscles are knotted and your breathing is shallow, relax all your muscles and take several deep, slow breaths. Note how, when you're relaxed, both your abdomen and chest expand when you breathe.
27. Writing your thoughts and feelings down (in a journal, or a paper to be thrown away) can help you clarify things and can give you a renewed perspective.
28. Try the following yoga technique whenever you feel the need to relax. Inhale deeply through your nose to the count of eight. Then with lips puckered, exhale very slowly through your mouth to the count of 15 or for as long as you can. Concentrate on the long sighing sound and feel the tension dissolve. Repeat 10 times.
29. Inoculate yourself against a feared event. For example, before speaking in public, take time to go over every part of the experience in your mind. Imagine what you'll wear, what the audience will look like, how you will present your talk, what the questions will be and how you will answer them, etc. Visualize the experience the way you would have it be. You'll likely find that when the time comes to make the actual presentation, it will be "old hat" and much of your anxiety will have fled.
30. When the stress of having to get a job done gets in the way of getting the job done, diversion (a voluntary change in activity and/or environment) may be just what you need.
31. Talk it out. Discussing your problems with a trusted friend can help clear your mind of confusion so you can concentrate on problem solving.
32. One of the most obvious ways to avoid unnecessary stress is to select an environment (work, home, leisure) which is in line with your personal needs and desires. If you hate desk jobs, don't accept a job which requires that you sit at a desk all day. If you hate to talk politics, don't associate with people who love to talk politics, etc.
33. Learn to live one day at a time.
34. Every day, do something you really enjoy.
35. Add an ounce of love to everything you do.
36. Take a hot bath or shower (or a cool one in the summertime) to relieve tension.
37. Do something for somebody else. Make a meal for someone who is in need.
38. Focus on understanding rather than on being understood; on loving rather than on being loved.
39. Do something that will improve your appearance. Looking better can help you feel better.
40. Schedule a realistic day. Avoid the tendency to schedule back-to-back appointments. Allow time between appointments for a breathing spell.
41. Become more flexible. Perfection isn't always necessary. Be willing to compromise.

42. Eliminate destructive self-talk such as “I’m too old” or “I’m too fat to.”
43. Use your weekend time for a change of pace. If your work week is slow and patterned, make sure there is action and time for spontaneity built into your weekends. If your work week is fast-paced and full of people and deadlines, seek peace and solitude during your days off. Feel as if you are not accomplishing anything at work? Tackle a job on the weekend which you can finish to your satisfaction.
44. "Worry about the pennies and the dollars will take of themselves." That’s another way of saying: take care of the todays as best you can and the yesterdays and the tomorrows will take care of themselves.
45. Do one thing at a time. When you are with someone, be with that person and with no one or anything else. When you are busy with a project, concentrate on doing that project and forget about everything else you have to do.
46. Allow yourself time-everyday-for privacy, quiet, and introspection.
47. If an especially unpleasant task faces you, do it early in the day and get it over with. Then, the rest of your day will be free of anxiety.
48. Learn to delegate responsibility to capable others.
49. Don’t forget to take a lunch break. Try to get away from your desk or work area in body and mind, even if it's just for 15 or 20 minutes.
50. Forget about counting to 10. Count to 1,000 before doing something or saying anything that could make matters worse.
51. Have a forgiving view of events and people. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world.
52. Have an optimistic view of the world. Believe that most people are doing the best they can because in most cases they are!

Sources:

- Parents: Find the Stress Relief You Need!" By Elizabeth Scott, M.S.
- Stress Management for Parents" by the Child Development Institute.