



Six Steps to Stress-Free Parenting (well, almost!)

By Ron Huxley, LMFT

Nothing describes parenting better than stress! As far as I can tell there are no stress-free ages or stages in raising children. Oh, some might be a little less challenging but they all have their ups and downs. Experts tell us that some stress, in moderate doses, actually increases performance. It is supposed to keep us sharp and ready for action. Too much stress will destroy our health and relationships.

Stress is defined as any physical or emotional demand that you feel unable to handle. These demands encompass all of the little hassles you experience every day, from the moment you try to get children up for school to the moment you finally get them to bed, at night. What makes daily hassles so dangerous is that they are too often considered trivial. Simply because they do occur every day, we disregard just how serious they can be to our overall well-being. Over time, these hassles of modern parenting add up, building in pressure, until we have an explosion of anger and frustration. In the aftermath, our family members stare at us in bewilderment or retaliate in defense.

In contrast, we take more seriously life's major hassles. The big three are major illness, death, or a divorce.

No one questions us when we react strangely when these hassles rear their ugly head. We even get lots of sympathy cards and support in our time of need. But what happens when a major hassle is a cause of celebration or even desired. For example, when we get married, move to a bigger house, get a promotion, or have a baby these are all joyous events, right? Yes, but they are also stressful!

Remember our definition: Stress is any demand you feel unable to manage. Can a marriage or new home be difficult to manage? Of course it can. If you do not have the management skills needed to cope with a particular problem and/or you are experiencing so many demands that no amount of skills are adequate to prevent you from being weighted down, you will experience stress. To help you better manage stress or prevent it altogether, here are six steps to stress-free (well, almost) parenting.

Stress Skill # 1: Be aware of stress.

Sounds obvious don't it? You would be surprised at the number of parents who are unable to recognize the early warning signs of stress. For some parents, these signs include feeling over tired, irritable, or restless. For others, they observe family members attack or withdraw from others more quickly. Make a list, as a family, of how each person feels when under a lot of stress. Use recent examples to clearly identify the early warning signs. Have members describe what was going on in their body when under stress. Talk about how devastating stress can be on us physically and emotionally. Post this list on the refrigerator and remind each other of the telltale symptoms rather than blow up at one another.

Stress Skill # 2: Take a time out.

Don't stop with just labeling your stressful feeling. Take some action. When recognizing stressful symptoms, announce: "I am going to take a time out." Time out allows family members to cool down when over heated. It also prevents family members from saying or doing things, when stressed, that they may regret. Of course, your family members might not like you taking a time out and follow you into the time out room. Politely ask them for a specific number of minutes and reassure them that you will come back out to discuss the situation that is causing you stress. If that doesn't work, lock the door and tell them you will be out soon!

Stress Skill # 3: Create a self-care plan.

You knew I was going to mention this one, didn't you? If you are guilty of putting other family members first all of the time and neglecting yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually, then you need a self-care plan. Make sure to eat a balanced diet, get plenty of sleep, and exercise two to three times a week. In addition, meditate, pray, or spend time in a relaxing activity every day, even if it is for just a few minutes at a time.

Stress Skill # 4: Buy a time management planner.

You wouldn't run a company or start a complex project without making plans and prioritizing your time. So don't run a home that way. Of course, we're not talking obsessive-compulsive behavior here. Just learn to use some simple time management principles. Go to your local stationary or office supply store and buy a basic time management planner. It has priority lists, contact names, project planners, calendars, and to do list already for you to better manage your life.

Stress Skill # 5: Solve problems together.

As parents, we think we have to have all the answers. Well, we don't. Trying to act like you do will increase stress for you and the kids. Helping to solve family problems increases your child's sense of ownership for the problem. Set up a regular time each week to talk about problems family members are experiencing and come up with working solutions. Set ground rules for the meeting, with basic courtesies being considered and allow everyone to contribute, no matter how ridiculous or self-serving the suggestion. And remember, while a family is indeed a democratic organization, the parents have veto power! Use it wisely.

Stress Skill # 6: Find support.

Find other adults, preferably parents, who will validate your feelings and support you when you need it. They could be a relative who baby-sits for a couple of hours or close friends who sit and have coffee together while the kids are in school. If you don't have a close friend or relative, join a group or enroll in a class. Start browsing in the phone book under social services or recreation or crazed-parents (just kidding). It doesn't even have to be parenting related. Just socialize and develop a strong social support network. This network will be there for you when the stress gets out of control. Or, when your child does.

These aren't the only ways to minimize stress in your life. They won't make your life stress-free. Experts claim that living stress-free isn't good for us anyway (although I would like to try it for a while). The reality is it isn't gonna happen! So, pick one skill and start managing you and your family's stress.