

# Managing stress for a healthy family

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As the nation continues to face high-levels of stress, families are susceptible to mounting pressures from finances and work. Raising a family can be rewarding and demanding even in healthy social and economic climates, so stressful times can make things much more challenging. An online survey<sup>[1]</sup> by the American Psychological Association (APA), conducted by Harris Interactive in August 2010, found that 73 percent of parents report family responsibilities as a significant source of stress. It was also found that over two-thirds of parents think their stress level has slight to no impact on their child's stress level. However, only 14 percent of tweens and teens reported that they are not bothered when their parent is stressed. Furthermore, the connection between high stress levels and health is alarming, with 34 percent of obese parents experiencing high levels of stress (defined as an 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale) as compared to 23 percent of normal-weight parents. It is important to consider the way a parent's stress and corresponding unhealthy behaviors affect the family. For example, the APA survey found that parents who are obese are more likely than those who are normal weight to have children who are obese. In addition, overweight children are more likely than normal-weight children to report that their parents are often worried and stressed.

Children model their parents' behaviors, including those related to managing stress. Parents who deal with stress in unhealthy ways risk passing those behaviors on to their children. Alternatively, parents who cope with stress in healthy ways can not only promote better adjustment and happiness for themselves, but also promote the formation of critically important habits and skills in children.

Parents know that changing a child's behavior, let alone their own, can be challenging. By taking small, manageable steps to a healthier lifestyle, families can work toward meeting their goals to be psychologically and physically fit.

APA offers the following tips to get you and your family started down a healthy path:

**Evaluate your lifestyle.** As a parent, it's important to model healthy behaviors for

your children. Children are more likely to lead a healthy lifestyle and less likely to associate stress with unhealthy behaviors if the whole family practices healthy living and good stress management techniques. So, ask yourself — How do I respond to stress? Do I tend to overeat or engage in other unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking and drinking alcohol, when I feel stressed? In what ways could my stress coping skills be improved?

**Talk about it.** If you notice that your children are looking worried or stressed, ask them what's on their minds. Having regular conversations can help a family work together to better understand and address any stressors children are experiencing. Low levels of parental communication have been associated with poor decision making among children and teens.<sup>1</sup> Talking to your children and promoting open communication and problem solving is just as important as eating well and getting enough exercise and sleep.

**Create a healthy environment.** Your home, work space and even social environment can influence your behaviors. Altering your environment can help alleviate stress. For example, cleaning up a cluttered environment can help. Look around your home and even your car and ask yourself, does this space feel clear and relaxing? Clearing up your home space for the family is something you and your children can control, and it teaches children to focus on those things they can control when feeling stressed.

**Focus on yourself.** The correlation between health, obesity and unhealthy choices is strong. When you and your family are experiencing stress, make a conscious decision to take care of yourselves. Get adequate doses of nutrients, physical activity and sleep. When you feel overwhelmed it is easy sometimes to fall into cycles such as eating fast food, plugging into sedentary electronic activities like playing video games or watching TV, or not getting enough sleep. Research shows that children who are sleep-deficient are more likely to have behavioral problems.<sup>2</sup> And, parents have an extraordinary amount of influence on their children's food choices.<sup>3</sup> A healthy dinner followed by an activity with your family, such as walking, bike riding, playing catch or a board game, and topped off with a good night's sleep can do a lot to manage or to lessen the negative effects of stress.

**Change one habit at a time.** You may aspire for your family to make multiple important changes at once such as eating healthier foods, being more physically active, getting a better night's sleep or spending more time together. However, if you are already overextended from juggling many different responsibilities, doing all of this at

once can feel overwhelming. Changing behaviors usually takes time. By starting with changing one behavior, you and your family are more likely to experience success, which can then encourage your family to tackle other challenges and to continue making additional healthy changes.

If you or a family member continues to struggle with changing unhealthy behaviors or feels overwhelmed by stress, consider seeking help from a health professional, such as a psychologist. Psychologists are licensed and trained to help you develop strategies to manage stress effectively and make behavioral changes to help improve your overall health.

For more information on stress, visit the APA Helpcenter<sup>[2]</sup>. Read the full methodology for the 2010 Stress in America<sup>[3]</sup>.

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## References

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- 3) Patrick, H. & Nicklas, T.A. (2005). "A Review of Family and Social Determinants of Children's Eating Patterns and Diet Quality." *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, Vol. 24, pp. 83-92.

1. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/index.aspx>
2. <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx>
3. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2010/methodology.aspx>

