Coping With Stress

All of us live with a little bit of stress. It’s a normal part of the day-to-day job of parenting. As a parent, you learn to multitask. But there are always times when even the best parents feel overwhelmed and stressed. Here are 10 ways to cope.

Our bodies produce powerful chemicals when we are stressed. Those chemicals help us react quickly in times of danger but can cause long-term health problems if the stress doesn’t go away.

Stress can come from many different sources. Each person has a different tolerance level for what feels normal and what feels stressful. What is important is to know how to calm yourself when you start to feel overwhelmed.

1. **Identify and address the problem.** (If you don’t already have it, ask your parent educator for more information about the six-step problem solving method.) For example, if dinnertime is always stressful because your child is tired, cranky, and hungry by the time the family is ready to eat, maybe serving his vegetables as an early appetizer would give him a boost to get through to the meal. He may not eat his veggies with dinner, but you can feel good that he had them earlier!

2. **Avoid “Why me?”** and take a more active look at a problem. Ask yourself, “What is it about the situation that is upsetting? Is it a person? A place? A thing?” You may not be able to avoid the problem, but controlling your reaction to the irritation may help relieve stress.

3. **Let some things go.** While we really want it to be sunny and warm for the playdate at the park, we have no control over the weather. Focus on what you can control. You may find you feel less stress.

4. **Contribute to the world.** Everyone has something they can give back; it may be a smile, volunteering to read to children at a local child care center, or helping to sort clothes for a relief agency. When you give the community something of yourself, you put aside your trouble for a short time.

5. **Listen to your body.** The chemicals our bodies release during stress are there to make sure we can move fast if we need to flee from danger or fight a ferocious foe. In today’s world a leaky dishwasher or pile of overdue bills doesn’t need that energy, but we get it just the same.

6. **Relax!** We have two nervous systems: the voluntary muscles like those in our arms and legs, and the involuntary nervous system that controls things like our breathing and heartbeat. While most parts of the involuntary nervous system can’t be controlled, we can control our breathing. When we slow down our breathing, we fool our body into thinking it is relaxing.

7. **Eat well.** A healthy body is more resistant to stress. Drink lots of water and avoid sugary and carbonated beverages that rob the body of nutrition.
8. **Sleep well.** Being tired makes symptoms of stress seem bigger. It can also make it harder to make decisions and cope with day-to-day activities. The average adult needs about eight hours of sleep a night to be at peak performance, and young children need even more.

9. **Take an instant vacation.** Find a hobby or activity that can distract you, even if just for a short time. It could be an activity that involves the whole family, or maybe something you do just for yourself.

10. **Release emotional tension.** You can do this in whatever ways feel right to you.

    - Scribble wildly on a piece of paper or color in a coloring book.
    - Talk to a trusted friend or professional.
    - Pray or talk with a spiritual advisor.
    - Cry. It doesn’t solve problems, but it does release the tension that prevents us from being able to look at them clearly.
    - Laugh! Laughter works just like crying to release built-up tension, and it is more fun. Ask your 3-year-old to tell you the latest knock-knock joke — you will both end up with belly laughs and feeling better!

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**How does your body feel when you are stressed?**

If you are nervous or tense, your body is telling you to flee. Go with it! Movement can take many forms — put in a CD and dance with your child or put on your shoes and walk around the block. You may want to plan a time each day to exercise.

Remember, exercise should be fun and not something that adds more stress.

If you are feeling anxious or afraid, your body is preparing to fight back against a foe. Look for a way to release the tension. Use the muscles in your upper body — throw a ball, swim, hit a tennis ball, or play ping-pong. If your child is still small enough, you could even lie on your back and lift him like a weightlifter would lift weights — fun for you and your child!