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You, your Family, and Stress

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

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Stress and the Family

1. You, Your Family, and Stress: An Introduction

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Change is one of the few constants in our lives that we all must contend with. In a dynamic society, such as ours, nothing remains the same. Recent research substantiates what we have all felt and experienced for some time—*change creates stress*.

Change is not the only cause of stress, however (3)*. Situations threatening our welfare and emotional safety may also cause stress. Often change is associated solely with overload situations in which there is too much stimulation. The converse, underload situations with too little stimulation (boredom), can also cause stress. Absenteeism and alcoholism, symptoms of stress, are common problems among production line workers with repetitive, uninteresting jobs.

Stress — A Familiar Concept

While the word “stress” is gaining new popularity, the meaning of stress has been with us for some time. Terms that have been similarly used in the past are pressure, tension, anxiety, nerves, and more recently, “up-tight.” Irrespective of the term used, the notion that stress does affect both our physical and mental health is always implied. Your body is continually giving you signs that something is going on inside. Reoccurring headaches and an upset stomach, disrupted eating and/or sleeping habits, tenseness of muscles, irritability, unexplained weight loss or gain, high blood pressure and the inability to concentrate are just some of the signs that commonly are identified with stress (1, 12, 14). The individual’s ability to recognize these or other signs of stress are vitally important to his personal welfare.

We all believe we know what stress is—in reality, few understand it. Fewer, yet, can recognize it for what it is. The effects of stress are very subtle and sort of “sneak up” on you.

Job successes and problems, family dynamics and individual development are major life events that cause stress. The unfolding of these events occurs unobtrusively over time and as such the average person rarely comprehends the total impact of any single event.

Individual Stress and Family Crises

As individuals experience stress, the family of which they are a part is also affected. Generally, the more stress experienced by family members, the greater is the family’s potential for crisis (5).

Similar events experienced by different families may result in different outcomes. The question asked is: Why? Why is it that families respond differently? Does a serious illness in a family always necessarily mean a family crisis? The answer is obviously no. Some families give *different meanings to similar events*. In one family, illness can be calmly accepted and dealt with by the members, while in another family the members may over-react and create a highly anxious climate (increased stress).

Resources available to the family are extremely important in dealing with stress. Family resources may be such things as insurance, money, friends, and community assistance (exogenous) or personal skills, education, health, cooperative attitudes, and adaptive behaviors (endogenous).

Life events and situations provoke stress, but the potential for family crisis is relative to particular types of families. Thus, while we are concerned with the stress producing effects of any stressor event, we are equally

*Numbers in parentheses refer to references listed on page 3.

concerned with a family's ability to cope with an event and minimize its crisis potential. Families that cope well with crises evidence the characteristics of familial involvement, integration, and adaptability (8).

1. **Family Involvement**—This refers to commitment to, and participation in, family life by the members of the group.
2. **Family Integration**—This refers to the interdependence of family roles. The openness for all family members to be involved in key instrumental and expressive roles. The sharing of status positions within the family.*
3. **Family Adaptation**—The ability of the family group and each member to change their specific responses, to each other and to the world, as the situation demands.

The concept of *involvement* suggests a commitment to family life by the members of the family group. The family environment ought to be a place of nurturance, tenderness, support, acceptance, caring, and warmth. The world is a very critical place in which to live. Decisions have to be made, yesterday. Schedules must be met. There seems to be very little time for quality human relationships, in which people support, accept, and care for each other. If the family does not provide such a place then it is obvious that family members will attempt to seek support elsewhere—or—begin to suppress the need for tenderness and support.

The adage, "The family that plays together, stays together," is often used to suggest ways of developing a positive family life attitude. While by chance, this positive attitude may occur because of mutual activities, it is by no means guaranteed. We have all observed, or have been a part of, family activities which absolutely have not contributed to a positive family life attitude.

The second characteristic, family *integration*, has to do with the interdependence of family roles among family members. While the authoritarian leader may have been appropriate for ships and businesses, and voting, appropriate for a democracy, both are often deadly in a family. Integration implies just that meaningful family responsibilities are delegated to all family members. Decisions are collectively made as to who will do what, and when.

Lastly, the characteristic of *adaptation* demands flexibility in family members. If there is *only one way* to do everything, this does not reflect adaptation. Some situations call for *knowledge* and *facts*, while others demand

hard work and effort, and sometimes the only solution to the problem comes with the *assistance of others*.

Recognizing Stress in Others

Another critical aspect in minimizing the family's crisis potential is learning to recognize signs of stress in family members.

We must learn how to communicate our concerns so as not to produce additional stress. Generally, people behave in a manner that they perceive to be best for them. For an individual change, based on our suggestions, means that he or she must develop "new" behaviors that often manifest levels of insecurity, however temporary. For the person experiencing stress, constructive behavioral changes are most likely accomplished under conditions of interpersonal support, acceptance, and understanding as opposed to advice giving.

The Need for Increasing the Coping Skills of Families

If the characteristics of *family involvement*, *integration*, and *adaptation* generally typify those families best able to cope with crisis-provoking events and stress, then it is reasonable to ask: how do families learn, refine, or generally increase their skills? Further what kinds of educational experiences and programs exist, or should be developed, to accomplish this objective?

More Information Available

The series of folders that follows this introduction (bulletins E-1002-1011) was prepared to assist you in understanding how to recognize stress, how to handle it, how to live with it, and how to make it work for you and your family.

The first folder, *Stress—Our Friend, Our Foe*, treats the subject of stress in a general manner. This article describes not only the physiological mechanisms of stress but related causes and effects as well.

This folder is followed by articles on infancy and childhood *Growing Up Mentally Fit*, adolescence, *Mastering Adolescence*, and aging, *Weathering the Years*. The next four titles cover stress in the home. *Home: Safe Harbor or Storm Center?*, on the job, *Managing Stress on the Job*, in the environment, *Making Your World More Livable*, and stress caused by changes—both good and bad, *How Change Can Make Us Ill*. Finally, the last two deal with "nervous breakdown" and "how to relax."

It is possible that as you read about stress, you may feel more stressful. Hopefully, by reading the articles you will be better able to understand how your body responds to stress and thus learn to recognize it.

*See Hansen's discussion of family typologies based on personal and positional relationships as related to family vulnerability to stress (see no. 7 in bibliography).

Recognition is the first step to help you face stressful situations and make the circumstances work for, instead of against you. One thing is for sure—learning how to face stressful situations and to handle them properly will make a family stronger and better prepared to cope with future life events. In this way, stress can be your friend rather than a response to be feared.

Stress is not to be totally eliminated and can never be avoided because positive change, growth, and self-development would be impossible without it. Change and stress are a part of life. Remember, there are limits to how far each individual can change and adapt and still continue to exist. Our task is to understand what these limits are and how to manage our lives within them.

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