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Home: Safe Harbor or Storm Center?

Michigan State University

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Stress and the Family

6. Home: Safe Harbor or Storm Center?

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

BY CATHERINE S. CHILMAN, Ph.D.

Home is where you should be able to take off your mask and become who you are. This unmasking, this letting go, can create or relieve stress. It depends on how you and your family feel about each other and how you express your feelings. If you can accept and love each other for your unmasked selves, if you can understand each others' woes, you can relieve each others' stress enormously. Fears and worries fade, anger drains away, tensions melt.

On the other hand if the members of your family cannot understand each other, if you react to each other with open or silent worry or resentment, stresses are likely to mount and home becomes a place of misery.

The tensions of home spill over into the outer world so that pressured family members are apt to have problems there, too. These problems bring further stress which escalates unhappiness and conflict at home.

It is important to try to interrupt this vicious stress circle at an early stage. It is a good idea for you and your spouse to take time to really listen and tell each other your feelings of fear, anger, frustration and worry. You can try to find out what each other's basic problems are and seek ways to solve them constructively. Not all problems can be solved, but many can be reduced. Pieces of problems can be handled, even though the larger problem may remain.

Some people hate to admit their family is less than perfect. Yet a family life of complete harmony and peace is an idealized picture, based only on magical dreams of childhood and advertisers who exploit those dreams.

It is natural for husbands and wives to be angry at each other some of the time, to be attracted to someone else, to wish that the children had never been born or at

least could be put in deep freeze for a while. The more you can accept that families have angry as well as loving feelings, that family members want to be free of each other as well as belong to each other, the less disenchanted you will be with family life. You can try to understand the reasons for anger and find ways to reduce it; you can try to give each person in the family freedom as well as a sense of belonging to the family.

Probably all people search for magic, for a sense of fulfillment and perfection in marriage and parenthood. Although there are magical moments in family life, there are more times of disenchantment. This is natural, though deeply disappointing.

The touch of magic, the hurts of disenchantment occur over and over again in the family life cycle. This cycle is like a circular staircase. We keep coming back to earlier life experiences, although, if all goes well, at a higher stage of development each time so that, more and more, we can understand and cope with both the pleasures and stresses involved.

The cycle starts with birth and infancy. Ancient, fleeting memories of that time are touched off over and over again throughout the life cycle. They are touched off as brothers and sisters are born and displace us from the enormous satisfaction of being the dependent baby who controls the family with our needs. (Thus, it is normal to have feelings of resentment and jealousy toward brothers and sisters and later, toward other people inside and outside the family.)

Those old memories of infant perfection arise again when we fall in love and experience deep intimacy. They re-arise when our own children are born and we yearn for their perfection and total love. And as our children grow into the teens and fall in love themselves, we are partly jealous of their new raptures and partly disappointed in their mates who inevitably are less than

perfect. Then, in time, we become grandparents and come full cycle with these precious new lives that stir, once more, dreams of magical perfect love.

Throughout family life, then, there are peak moments of magic and many times of disenchantment. If you cannot accept this, savoring the "perfect" times, accepting and coping with the imperfect ones, you are apt to experience enormous pressures. These pressures are brought about partly through endless striving for "magical success" outside the family, striving for more and more money and things, striving for love and recognition, striving for status and power.

These strivings can deprive you of the love and comfort that can be found in the partnership of marriage and in companionship with your children. These strivings become more debilitating over the years as you lose the energy and resilience of youth, as financial pressures mount, as rearing children becomes more complicated and they become more obviously imperfect and finally leave home.

Our luxury-loving mechanized society takes its toll on the family. It drives husbands and wives to more frantic money-making efforts. It fractures neighborhoods and leaves young mothers and children in isolation. It distracts members of families from shared interests and activities. It swallows up people in an impersonal world of machines and big organizations. And it isolates the poor from real membership in society.

Though some say the new society makes families obsolete, this is a mistaken notion. More than ever families are needed to provide people with the intimacy, personal understanding, loving support and sense of individual importance that all of us need. Without the family as a personal repair and rehabilitation center, it is likely that the emotional and physical problems associated with stress overload would continue to build.

The most common family problems center on *money*, *sex*, *child-rearing* and *lack of communication* (already discussed). These problems express themselves somewhat differently at different stages of the family life cycle.

Money problems for the average family can be resolved by careful planning based on realistic discussions and agreements between husband and wife and those children who are old enough to understand the issues.

It is common for parents to keep such details from youngsters, partly because they think money is a private and secret matter. They may also keep money matters from each other, each partner "protecting" the other from knowledge about how much money each has and what each is doing with it. Now that we are getting much less secretive about our sexual feelings and behaviors, isn't it about time to let money out of the closet, too?

Money is often seen as a substitute for love and sex; this is one reason that it excites so much secrecy and strong feelings. As children, our parents may have given us money or things as an expression of, or substitute for, love.

Money can also bring status, power and freedom. Increasingly, wives challenge the right of husbands to control all the family finances. About half the wives in this country are earning money through employment outside the home; others are asking for money for themselves or at least token wages for their work as homemakers.

In general, it is a good principle that each family member, including children of ages 3 or 4 and older, be given at least a small allowance to spend as he or she wishes—and no questions asked.

If you really try to build warm relationships within your family, you can reduce the temptation to seek personal fulfillment through material things. Most husbands would rather have a loving, understanding wife than an expensive car; most wives would rather have a husband's tenderness and adoration than a fur coat; most children would really rather have the love and attention of their parents than a fancy bicycle, even though they don't understand it at the time.

Sex is apt to be the marital battleground for much more than the perfect orgasm. Physically fulfilling and tension-relieving as that may be, an orgasm devoid of loving, open relationships can leave both male and female feeling lonely and without value.

Sexual fulfillment can significantly reduce other stresses of life. This fulfillment is most apt to occur within a committed, loving, open relationship.

Lack of sexual fulfillment is apt to increase stresses within the self and between partners, and make other life pressures seem more severe.

The concept of "natural roles" for males and females can be taken for granted no longer. The resulting fracas probably has been felt in every home. Good, but painful questions are being raised. She: "Why should *I* be the one to cook the meals, do the wash, stay home with the children?" He: "Why should *I* mow the lawn, shovel the snow, support the family?"

Surely it is good that today's males and females are trying to relate honestly as equal human beings, rather than as sexual stereotypes. Their experiments in trying to find creative ways of fulfilling themselves and each other offer promise for more rewarding and less stressful relationships. The odds are that eventually most will have to settle for the principle that males and females are equal but different. And the equalities and differences can be delightful, as well as distressing.

Child rearing is thrilling, irritating, delightful, heart-breaking, funny, defeating and strenuous. Always strenuous. It can be made easier if we realize that parents are people, too, and have rights to their own lives as human beings as well as parents. Parents are not fixed objects, forever just a father and a mother. They are husbands and wives, doers and learners outside the home as well as within it. They are capable of growing, developing and changing. Parenthood can help them in this process if they view it creatively as a growth-producing experience, rather than just a series of responsibilities and sacrifices.

Many of today's parents are wallowing in guilt. They have bought the story that they, alone, determine how their children turn out. Some like this story because it makes them feel important and powerful. But, more than ever, children are primarily the products of the larger society as well as of the family. Parents help to shape children's lives, but so do school, the neighborhood, TV and other influences.

The ideal and grossly unrealistic image of the perfect family also hassles parents. Nobody is a perfect parent. Actually, the imperfections of average family life help to prepare children to live in the real, imperfect world.

Although children have a fantastic array of needs that must be met, we cannot so ignore our own that we are frustrated, exhausted and irritable. This creates stress in ourselves that spills over into children, mates and the family pet. Soon the whole household rings with crying, accusations and yowls of dismay. The vicious stress circle is well on its way. Try to stop it before it starts or shortly after it begins by not asking the impossible of your youngsters or yourselves.

Be of good cheer. Soon the present crisis will subside and you will be free to love them again.

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