



Steps to Parents Managing Stress

Parenting is one area where it's easy to feel out of control... we are constantly tapping into our physical and emotional reserves and/or limited life experience in raising children.



When it comes to stress, there's an undeniable fact: we all need some level of stress to function as a human being. However, when that level of stress becomes 'distress' then we need to learn new ways to cope and manage our emotions and our workload.

The secret to stress management is to understand what makes us feel stressed (stressors), learn to recognise the symptoms of stress, and then find strategies and/or develop ways to adjust our responses to stress to keep it at a manageable level.

Of all the jobs we undertake, parenting in particular is about learning on the job. That means it's going to be a very steep learning curve at times.

There are plenty of guide books to consult, but who's got time to sit down and read three chapters on getting baby to sleep while the crying continues or go online to discover how to stop bad behaviour when the kids have lost it totally? Expect stress at times – it's all part of the job description.

How to recognise symptoms of stress

The stress response is our body's way of protecting us. Stress helps us stay alert, meet challenges, focus on what we're doing, tap into our source of energy, and in instances of 'fight or flight', galvanise us into action to avoid danger.

However, the reality is that stress has a way of creeping up on us unawares. It's easy to get used to levels of stress and ignore the fact that they're beginning to take a toll on our mind, our body and ultimately, our behaviour.

In recognising stress, we need to stop and take on board whether we're exhibiting any common signs. These can include:

- mood swings, distraction
- inability to concentrate or make decisions
- unable to relax or consistently feeling agitated, anxious, worried or overwhelmed
- problems with memory
- short temper, frustration, aggression
- physical symptoms such as aches, pains, rashes, nausea, dizziness, recurring colds or flu

- pessimistic outlook on life, constantly feeling down, depression
- not sleeping properly, tiredness
- relationship or employment problems

Stress is often exacerbated not only by our failure to recognise signs, but also by our response to stressors through faulty beliefs, thoughts and actions following certain situations and events.

We can fall into the trap of thinking a situation or event is stressful, because we believe it to be so. This may not necessarily be the case, and often it pays to sit down and re-think or talk through perceived causes of stress with partner, family or friend, to get a more balanced perspective.

Parenting and stress

Parenting can be stressful – even with the best behaved kids on the block. Kids are kids – they will act out their frustrations, misbehave, and defy authority. They will cause us pain of some sort, sometime, somehow. And as for the planets being aligned as regards our employment, housing, family, health and levels of happiness, unfortunately the world has a way of



occasionally shifting on its axis to give our foundations a severe shake. Stress happens.

Parenting is one area where it's easy to feel out of control. Being a carer, role model, teacher and nurturer means we are constantly tapping into our physical and emotional reserves and/or limited life experience in raising children.

Choosing to take responsibility for our own emotions is important. When the parenting journey gets tough, a positive outlook, rational self-talk, a balanced perspective and a sense of humour will help to get us through. Our kids are not responsible for our anxieties and emotional tension. Children will undoubtedly make mistakes, as will parents. It's all perfectly natural, and all part of being a parent.

When it comes to parenting, it pays to have a realistic attitude. What is unrealistic about the job of parenting is to have unrealistically and unattainable high ideals and expectations. The perfect child, home, school, relationship or lifestyle does not exist. Every child is unique, as will be their upbringing. Making comparisons or trying to live up to another family's successes or achievements, can so often create stress and feelings of frustration... for us.

With each developmental stage of childhood, new stressors are bound to emerge. Most often, a decision needs to be made on the spot, without the luxury of time to think things through or talk it over with family or friends. Being prepared for certain aspects of parenting, such as agreed strategies on discipline or behaviour for example, helps to not only provide consistency for the child, but also keep our stress levels manageable for the times when our buttons are being pushed.

Team parent

Parenting is team work. If you have a partner, try laying some ground rules together. These can include your preferences for parenting styles, what you both want and expect from parenting, strategies for partnering and coping and what support networks you can tap into if needed. If you are a

single parent, maybe think about seeking out significant adults within family or friends, who can support both you and your style of parenting.

Where possible, as a family unit, work on nurturing and developing relationships that are mutually supportive, empathetic, and encouraging. Knowing you have back up can be hugely significant in stress management.

From an early age children can be encouraged to know that as part of your family they can help around the house. Daily chores and tasks (however small) help them to learn about responsibility, ownership, and cooperation.

Regardless of whether you decide on in-house care for your children or you opt for daycare outside the home, let your carers know your preferences for parenting. This way, carers can be aligned with your philosophy and be partners in supporting your strategies.

Parents are people too

Raising young children can be everything from exhilarating to exhausting. Just because our child is asleep, it doesn't necessarily mean that this time is our own or that their downtime means we have hours to ourselves to pursue an interest. The responsibility of caring for small children is constant and it can be easy to focus on our child's development and interests, and forget that as parents, we are people too.

Making time for ourselves isn't so much selfish as essential. It can be difficult to juggle full-time work, a social life and interests outside family, but adult time away from children can often provide much needed balance, perspective and stimulation. 'Me' time means we have an opportunity to relax, catch a movie, coffee with friends, or enjoy a special hobby. 'Me' time also means that we can return to the job of parenting refreshed and ready for special time with our kids.

Regardless of whether you are parenting with a partner or going solo, however small the window of

opportunity, make some time for yourself on a regular basis. A coffee with other young mums or dads is also a great way to talk through problems, compare notes and enjoy some adult company. If you have a trusted babysitter, make the most of a night out or an afternoon shopping or a stroll in the park in the sun.

10 steps to stress reduction

If you're a busy parent, some of these suggested steps may not be easy at first. But depending on your priorities, and how stressed you may currently feel, maybe they're worth a quick glance...

1. The mind/body makeover

Eat well, exercise, catch up on sleep or watch caffeine levels. Try getting up half an hour earlier in the morning just to have some special time to yourself before the rest of the family kick starts their day.

2. Non-technology time

If technology is ruling your life, experiment with down times for emails, texts, tweets and time and energy spent on social media web sites.

3. Learn to say no

Favours for family and friends, projects around the house, social activities, invitations, additional work commitments – learn to say no to the things you can't achieve rather than run yourself ragged trying.

4. Rethink priorities

Not everything is urgent, not everything is a 'must' or a 'should'. List those things that have to be done, and practise making the distinction between needs and preferences.

5. Keep communication lines open

Talk to your partner, your kids, family, friends, daycare and preschool staff. Try to keep up with what's going on, what's coming up and one step ahead of where problems might be emerging.



6. Don't rely on memory

Missing an appointment, forgetting lunch with friends or being late for pickup can create instant stress. If it has to be remembered, remind yourself – lists, Outlook, diary, smartphone or tablet.

7. Relax standards

Domestics are always happy to wait until someone steps in, and the world has a tendency to keep spinning even if we haven't had time to bake, wash cars, water the pot plants or sew on a button.

8. Be mindful

Mindfulness is all about living in the moment, making the most of right now, enjoying what life has in store for us today. Continually projecting forward or back to what has to be done or what should have been done, can rob us of the enjoyment of what we're currently doing.

9. Organisation

Keep a spare set of keys, make sure the contact list for daycare, family, doctor, preschool etc. is up to date, allow that extra ten or fifteen minutes to get to an appointment on time, try to keep a lid on organisation at home and the workplace.

10. Breathe in, breathe out

When stressed, try stretching or stopping to take some deep breaths or sit for ten minutes with eyes closed and let your body just relax. If you have time, try writing thoughts in a journal, plugging calming music into the iPod, or practise meditation or yoga... any preferred activity that helps you to feel less overwhelmed.