

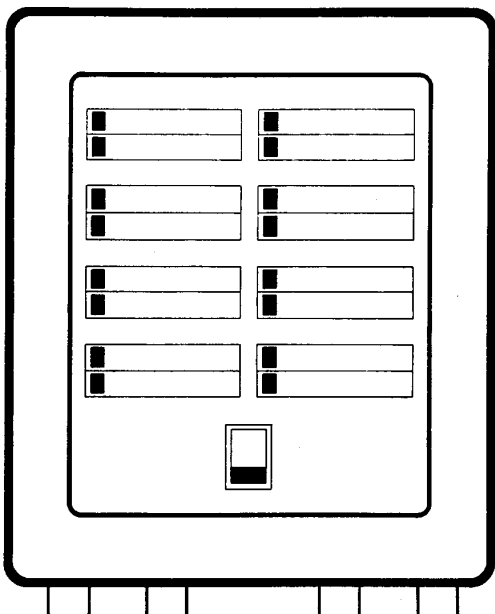
Lesson 5

From Family Stress to Family Strengths

Sometimes a family is like a circuit box. When too many things go wrong, the circuits overload and throw a breaker. Here is a quick activity to see how much stress your family is loading on the circuits. Simply write in each slot something that is causing stress in your family. Then read on to learn more about family stress, how families can cope with stress, and ways to bring out the strengths of your family.

Family Stress

Benjamin Franklin said the only things a person can be sure of in this world are death and taxes. It should be noted that a third sure thing exists. **This third reality is family stress and it involves change.** Children change, parents change, often for the better. But you are also expected to endure those not-so-pleasant life events such as death and illness in the family. Certainly, these events bring about feelings of hurt, frustration, anger, and depression. In the family we may experience marital conflict, sibling conflict, or parent-child conflict, all in response to family stress.



Why the Whole Family?

Usually, discussions on stress have focused on a single person—how stress affects that person and how that person copes with stress. But when considering family stress, you need to focus on the total family and its ability to cope with stress. For example, does the stress of an alcoholic teen affect just that teen? No, it affects all members of that family, the relatives, and possibly the community. If you focused only on the teen, you would miss about 80 percent of the potential stresses that could occur.

Definition

Family stress can be defined as a real or imagined imbalance between the demands on the family and the family's ability to meet those demands. For example, if a family is forced to renegotiate a home mortgage from 7 percent interest to the current market rate, this could place the family under stress. There is a real imbalance between the demand—the current market rate—and a lack of financial resources to meet that demand.

In the definition of family stress, the **demands** in the family are commonly referred to as **stressors**. **A stressor is a life event or transition that happens in the family. It can be either positive or negative and can cause a change in the family's coping pattern.** Examples of stressors could be an event like the birth of a child, drought, death, or divorce. Other stressors could be a hardship such as increased medical expenses because of a chronically ill child or a normal change in a family member's development, such as a family member becoming a teen or turning 40.

Perception

How the family perceives the stressor will have a great effect on the seriousness of the family stress. This perception reflects the family's values and its previous experience in dealing with change and meeting crisis. A family's outlook can vary from seeing life changes as challenges to be met to viewing a stressor as uncontrollable and the beginning of ruin for the family.

Role of Resources

Families also have resources for meeting the demands of a stressor. These resources are a part of the family's ability to handle stress. They include: family communication patterns, the family's ability to solve problems, the goals of the family, money, relatives and friends, and services in the community.

Will Crisis Occur?

These conditions:

- the stressor event,
- the family's perception of the event, and
- the family's resources for dealing with the event all help to determine how vulnerable a family is and its ability to prevent the stressor from creating a crisis.

In some families, stress may not reach a crisis because the family is able to use existing resources and sees the situation in such a way to prevent a crisis. For example, a one family may experience a move as very stressful because it involves emotional changes as well as physical changes. Another family may view a move as a great opportunity for advancement and "starting over." Some families who have moved often realize there is a period of adjustment to a move and relax through the process.

In other cases, families may experience crisis. A crisis is a situation in which the usual behavior patterns are ineffective and new ones are called for immediately. A crisis provides families with both dangers and opportunities.

Coping

Developing skills to respond to crisis occurs over time. How families accomplish this is called **family coping**. It is often the strength of families.

Coping is what one does with resources both from inside the family and throughout the community. It is the action the family takes to remove the stressor, live with the hardships, or develop new resources in response to a crisis.

Try completing Exercise 1 to find out about the strength of your family's coping strategies.

Exercise 1—Coping Skills for Families

Read the list of family statements. Ask yourself, “How well does this statement describe our family?” Rate each of the statements on a 1-5 scale (1 = your family is weak in that area and 5 = extremely strong). There is no definite score for a strong family but items rated 1 or 2 should be discussed. After completing this activity, read on to learn about managing family stress.

	Weak			Strong	
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Our family does many things together.					
2. Our family holds family meetings whenever necessary or on a regular basis					
3. We encourage family members to help each other whenever possible.					
4. Our family is a priority to our members.					
5. Our family allows members to participate in activities outside the family.					
6. Our family members express appreciation to one another.					
7. Our family tries to look on the bright side no matter what happens.					
8. A variety of feelings are able to be expressed in our family.					
9. Our family members are active in clubs or organizations.					
10. We can count on family and friends for help when needed.					
11. Our family gets together with other families who have the same lifestyle.					
12. Our family is able to accept outside help when needed.					
13. We ignore criticisms of others about how we “should” function as a family.					
14. We believe there are more advantages than disadvantages to the way we live.					
15. Our roles in the family are shared.					
16. We believe that our lifestyle has made us better people and a stronger family.					
17. Our family doesn’t let problems go unresolved.					
18. We relieve tension through sports, exercise, jogging, relaxing.					
19. Our family tries to stay healthy by eating right, not smoking, keeping active.					
20. Our family has many hobbies to help us manage stress.					

Coping Skills for Families

Hamilton McCubbin, family stress researcher at the University of Wisconsin, states that families who do a good job of managing stress have the following characteristics:

- **They do things as a family.** They work hard at keeping the family functioning. When under stress, it is very easy for family members to withdraw from each other. Just because families live under the same roof does not mean they do things together. (Statements 1-4 in Exercise 1, Coping Skills for Families, are examples of families doing things together.)
- **They build esteem in each other and themselves.** They show appreciation for each other and let other members know they understand. It is very common for a family member's self-esteem to be affected when stress occurs. Families who do a good job of managing stress take care of themselves physically and mentally. They build their own self-esteem. (Statements 5-8 in Exercise 1, Coping Skills for Families, are examples of families building esteem in each other.)
- **They develop social support within the community.** Families are better able to endure hardships if they reach out to the community instead of becoming isolated from it. Meeting new friends, joining clubs, using community facilities are examples of utilizing community supports. (Statements 9-12 in Exercise 1, Coping Skills for Families, are examples of developing social support.)
- **They enjoy the lifestyle they have chosen and can endure the hardships of that lifestyle better than those who are not satisfied with their current way of life.** For example, a homemaker who enjoys that lifestyle and is supported by family and friends will feel less stress than the person who would rather be away from home but for various reasons cannot. (Statements 13-16 in Exercise 1, Coping Skills for Families, are examples of accepting one's lifestyle.)

- **They develop and use a range of tension-reducing devices. Examples are exercise, relaxation, a positive outlook, and keeping involved in activities.** These techniques help manage the tensions and conflicts that are a part of family life. (Statements 17-20 in Exercise 1, Coping Skills for Families, are examples of reducing tension.)

Family Strengths

Families can decrease the effects of stressful situations by building up their strengths. Learning to communicate with family members helps in times of stress. Encourage talking and listening. Accept each other's feelings, concerns, and ideas. Develop problem-solving skills. Let each family member know he or she is appreciated and loved. Being able to accept the support of friends and neighbors can also help strengthen your family.

The purpose of Exercise 2 is to help families discover the positive strengths they already have.

Exercise 2—Our Family Coat of Arms

Directions:

On a piece of paper, copy the Coat of Arms below. Make one for each person participating in the activity. Answer each one of the questions with pictures. The pictures can be simple.

The important thing is that each person knows what the drawings mean. When everyone has completed all six areas, share your drawings and their meanings with one another.

<p>1. What do you consider to be our family's greatest achievement?</p>	<p>2. What three family activities do you enjoy doing?</p>
<p>3. What one thing could other family members do to make you happy?</p>	<p>4. What three family rituals mean a lot to you?</p>
<p>5. What is something that our family improved over the past two years?</p>	<p>6. What three words could be a family motto that we could all believe in?</p>

Finding Time

“Our problem is not doing things as a family; it is finding a time when everyone is together.” You may have heard this before, or even said it yourself. It is a common complaint.

It might be helpful to actually keep a record of how family members spend their day. One way to find out is to keep a **Week-at-a-time** Chart for everyone. It is similar to keeping a checkbook, and it will show you how often your family is together.

Divide the chart into seven sections, one for each day of the week. Then divide each day into eight

segments—6 a.m. to 9 a.m., 9 a.m. to noon, noon to 3 p.m., 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.; 9 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 3 a.m., and 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Have each person make his or her own chart. Then simply keep track of how you spend your day. (This might have to be done for younger children.) Pick a typical week—not when you have overnight guests or the kids are away at camp.

At the end of a week, review all the charts carefully. You will be able to see how your family spends its time and when you are together. Seeing how often and when your family is together may help you determine the types of activities appropriate for your family.

Week-at-a-time Chart

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
6 a.m.-9 a.m							
9 a.m.-noon							
noon-3 p.m.							
3 p.m.-6 p.m.							
6 p.m. - 9 p.m.							
9 p.m. - midnight							
midnight - 3 a.m.							
3 a.m. - 6 a.m.							

Are you satisfied with your family time? Lesson 6 will provide specific guidance and activities for enhancing family time and building family strengths.

Study Questions

Lesson 5

From Family Stress to Family Strengths

1. How does the idea of family stress differ from stress as explained in Stress Management For the Health of It (Lesson 1)?

2. Why is it that some families adapt to the stress of a move, for example, easier than other families adapt?

3. What are the characteristics of families that manage family stress effectively?

4. What is a favorite activity of your family that helps build family strengths?

Study Answers

Lesson 5

From Family Stress to Family Strengths

1. Family stress refers to an imbalance between demands facing a family and the ability of that family to handle the demands. In other words, if there are more stressful events happening to a family than the family can handle, family stress results.

Stress as defined in Lesson 1 means the “wear and tear” on our bodies caused by the physical and mental adjustments we make to living. In this definition, stress focuses on an individual’s reaction to stress.

2. A family that sees stress as a challenge, feels confident in its ability to handle stress, has had success in handling previous stressful situations, and has prepared for potential problems will manage stress more effectively.

3. (1) They do things as a family; (2) They build esteem in each other; (3) They “reach out” to their community; (4) They enjoy their chosen lifestyle; and (5) They reduce tension and conflict.

4. Thanks for sharing your ideas. If you haven’t already mentioned them, here are some others to try:

- read a favorite book as a family,
- sort old snapshots,
- build a snow fort,
- fly a kite,
- get out the table games,
- invest a few dollars in lawn game equipment,
- take a family bicycle ride,
- visit local historical sites.

Additional Reading

The Joy of Success: How To Make Stress Work for You by P. Hanson, M.D., Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews and McMeel, 1988.

Love, Medicine and Miracles by B. Seigel, M.D., New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986.

Stress and the Healthy Family by D. Curran, Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1985.

Reference

Family Stress, Resources and Coping by H. McCubbin and J. Patterson, St. Paul, Minn.: Department of Family Social Science, 1981.

NOTES

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