

surviving parenthood



How to manage the stress

BY KATHRYN DAVIS

Author Lionel Kauffman once said, "Children are a great comfort in your old age, and they help you reach it faster, too." There's no doubt that parenting can be stressful. What's more, a recent study at the University of Wisconsin found that parents of children with disabilities face even more daily stress and are more susceptible to its effects, including long-range health problems.

Raising a child with special needs presents its own challenges. "Parents are often frustrated and anxious about dealing with specialists and treatments that they have never encountered before. They are putting

their trust in professionals who they have no prior relationship with," explains Frank J. Sileo, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Center for Psychological Enhancement in Ridge-wood. "Treatments and interventions take time, money, energy and lots of planning. Often the parent is juggling work, a marriage, a home, other siblings and the child with special needs."

In addition to feeling overwhelmed by therapies and interventions, and the resulting decrease in personal time, parents often feel alone and worry about the future. Sileo notes these parents "worry about reactions from society and feel isolated from others. They have concerns over their child's future well-being and functioning. They are concerned

about finances and struggle with feelings of grief and sadness."

Another aspect of stress stems from a child's individual needs and behaviors. Sileo says parents are "more susceptible to stress because of the distinct characteristics that individuals with special needs exhibit."

A child with autism, for example, may not be able to communicate his needs, leaving both child and parents feeling frustrated. Weak social skills may contribute to problems with siblings. To help these children feel more secure, a consistent and structured routine is required, which takes extra planning and effort. Typical daily events, such as meal-time or bedtime, are often challenging. These issues can be very draining, both physically >

and emotionally. They can impact normal family rituals, such as attending outside events together. It also affects the amount of time spouses have to spend alone.

REACTING TO STRESS

People generally respond to overwhelming situations in one of three ways. They may become overly emotional or agitated. They may withdraw and repress their feelings. Sometimes, they appear to be tense, but calm, while inside they are boiling over.

Symptoms of chronic stress can be physical. They can include aches and pains, digestive upsets, chest pain and rapid heartbeat, and an increased susceptibility to colds. They can also cause a loss of sex drive, which can impact relationships and self-esteem.

Stress can also manifest in other ways. It can affect concentration and judgment. It can cause sleep disturbances, isolation, eating disorders, nervous habits, unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, alcohol or drug use, and procrastination or avoidance of responsibilities. Moodiness, irritability and depression can also result from chronic stress.

However, there are tools parents can use to help manage stress. Some strategies are more obvious than others, but reducing stress is beneficial for the entire family.

KNOWLEDGE IS EMPOWERING

Many parents may be unsure of their options, and be unaware of information about available resources. They may feel distrustful and have difficulty making decisions. However, the best way to counter feelings of helplessness is to become knowledgeable.

The unknown is always the most frightening. When meeting with professionals, educators, therapists, etc., take the time to ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, repeat back directions and take notes.

Do some research. By indulging in worry through research, parents can move toward constructive ideas and options.

Knowledge and preparation can make it far easier to cope with stressful situations. Knowing what to expect allows time to plan and prepare.

"Educate yourself. Knowledge is power," says Sileo. "When you understand what is happening, you feel more in control of things and less stressed."

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Having to face a difficult situation is always easier when it is not done alone. Finding sources of support is one of the best methods parents can use in dealing with stress. Sharing worries with others is a great way to bring them into the light where they can be examined and better understood.



"Stress management must be done everyday, not only during crisis."

FRANK J. SILEO, Ph.D.

Sometimes the people in a support network may be no more than a sympathetic sounding board. Often, however, they may be a source of new insights or information.

Formal support groups are one option, and there are many locally established groups that can be found through parent advocacy groups and parenting organizations. There are also various support groups accessible online. **Another alternative is to seek professional assistance, suggests Sileo. "An objective person can be really helpful in sorting through the problems."**

Another option for support is in strengthening existing relationships. Close trusted friends and family members may offer sympathy along with some short-term solutions, such as respite time when things get too overwhelming. Having someone to count on can make the pressures of life more bearable. Maintaining healthy relationships is an important part of life and may be one of the most effective tools for managing stress.

ELIMINATE OBSTACLES

Some sources of stress are rooted in daily habits. For example, it is important to create a realistic schedule, focusing on one thing at a time. Learn to be flexible and accept that not everything will go according to plan. **Sometimes perfection is just not possible and the best course of action is compromise. Sileo suggests listing daily goals. He warns,**

however, "Don't be overly rigid about not accomplishing everything on your list."

Consider the "KISS" method. Keep It Simple, Silly. Stressful situations are easier to manage, and possibly avoid, by staying organized. Aim to simplify, delegate and plan ahead. Maintain a calendar of appointments and important events, and keep it current. Don't forget advance alert dates for making or confirming appointments ahead of time, including IEP meetings, annual physicals or dental cleanings.

Many stressors can be avoided by planning ahead. Parents who know their child's triggers are better equipped to either prevent or deal with them when they arise. Preparing for morning problems the evening before, and setting up contingency plans, are both helpful strategies.

PRIORITY CARE

Caring for someone else is contingent upon the ability of the caregiver. Consider the emergency instructions given on airplanes. Parents are told to always put the oxygen mask on themselves first, before trying to help their children. This is logical advice, since it would not benefit a child if his parent were to become unconscious. This same logic applies in parenting. Parents who are overtired, for example, will have less patience.

In order to do the work of parenting successfully, and also manage stress levels, Sileo >



“Studies show maintaining an optimistic attitude and a sense of humor make it easier to cope with stress.”

recommends that parents get enough sleep, avoid caffeine and alcohol, and eat balanced meals. “Try to avoid eating on the run,” he notes, adding, “Take time to exercise. Take a brief walk, do some yoga or breathing work.”

Parents also need to take care of their emotional selves. “Take time for yourself, your relationship and other family members,” Sileo says. He suggests keeping a journal to help focus and process negative feelings. “Writing increases self-awareness,” he explains.

A positive attitude is more powerful than many people realize. Studies show maintaining an optimistic attitude and a sense of humor make it easier to cope with stress. Something as simple as counting one’s blessings can be enlightening. Learning how to manage emotions can facilitate balance and a sense of control.

Take one day at a time. Each and every day, find time to do something enjoyable. Activities like taking a walk or listening to music are options that don’t necessarily require a lot of time or special arrangements. The point is for parents to take a break, find time to make themselves a priority and, in a sense, recharge their batteries.

Managing stress does not mean ignoring problems. It simply means dealing with them from a position of strength. Parents can do that by making their physical and emotional health a priority.

“Stress management must be done everyday, not only during crisis,” warns Sileo. “Like playing a musical instrument or a sport, you must practice these skills and implement a stress management plan into your lifestyle.” ❖

Kathryn Davis, a New Jersey writer, teacher and mother, is The Parent Paper’s columnist for special needs issues.

GEORGE DOYLE/STOCKBYTE/THINKSTOCK