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THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

SP487-B

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Taking Care of the Parent: Replacing Stress with Peace

In the book *Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, Alexander has a day when everything goes wrong. He gets gum in his hair, trips on a skateboard, gets scrunched in the car, is deserted by his friends, goes to the dentist, and falls in the mud. At home he is scolded by his mom, gets in trouble with his dad, has lima beans for dinner, gets soap in his eye, and is left alone by the cat.

Have you ever had a day when everything went wrong? Bad days make it hard to be patient and loving. A tired, frustrated, angry person is not likely to be a good parent.

This publication is intended to help you deal with stress so that you can be a more peaceful person and a more effective parent. We suggest that you take the time to do the exercises throughout this publication. That way, you'll be making your personal plan to replace the stress in your life with peace.

What makes you feel stressed?

Every person has bad days. Sometimes a person has lots of bad days. Think of the things that make you feel stressed. List as many things that cause you stress as you can, especially the ones that bother you most. Make your list as complete as you can.

Maybe your list includes lack of money, whining or nagging children, and loneliness. Having a list of your worries may be useful as you try to deal with them.

What does stress do to you?

When stress builds up, it can result in anger, headaches, discouragement, depression, stomach-aches, feelings of helplessness, self-hate, and other "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad" feelings.

What are some of the reactions and feelings you have when you get too much stress?

One of the worst effects of stress can be a feeling of helplessness that comes when we feel there is nothing we can do to fix things. When we feel helpless, we may stop trying to solve problems. Then the problems get worse. And we feel worse. Then we get angry or discouraged. We do less. And things keep getting worse. That is a trap!

Stressors:

Stress Reactions:

How can you deal with stress?

What can you do to deal with the stresses in your life? There are many things that can help. A first thing is to think about things you love to do. Do you love to sing? Do you love to be alone in nature? Do you love to talk to friends? Do you love to play with your children? Do you love to exercise? List 20 things you love to do.

Next, ask yourself: "Do I take time in my life for the things I love?" What can you do to make more time for the things you love?

Filling your life with things you love is a first step toward dealing with stress. There are other tools that can help also.

Things I Love to Do:

What I Can Do To Make Time For The Thing I Love

Suggestions for dealing with stress:

Read over the list below and mark the suggestions that will help you deal with your stress. You can use them to make a personal stress plan.

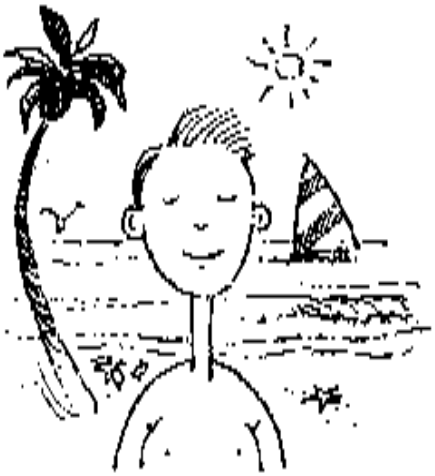
____ 1. Recognize the things that bother you. Becoming aware of your stresses is a first step to dealing with them. It also is part of showing respect for your own feelings.

____ 2. Recognize that you may not be able to fix everything at once, but there are things you can do that will help. Maybe they are little things. But they make a difference.

____ 3. Throw away stresses that you cannot change. For instance, you may worry that an earthquake or tornado is going to destroy you and your family. While it is possible that you could move to a safer house or city, it may be more appropriate to throw away that worry. You may want to close your eyes and mentally tie the tornadoes in a knot and throw them in the trash or lock them in a closet. Decide which of your stresses you cannot change by thinking about them. Then don't think about them.

____ 4. Replace stressful thoughts with pleasant ones. Think of it as emotional gardening. You pull the ugly weeds out of your garden, and you cultivate the good plants. Instead of dwelling on a hurt or an injustice, think about someone you like and perhaps about some way you can help that person. A beautiful garden is very satisfying. A garden of weeds can be very discouraging.

____ 5. Allow yourself to have vacations from stress. Sometimes we feel so worn-out or frustrated that we want to cry or scream. That's a good time for a mental vacation. Find a place where you can be alone. Lie down, close your eyes, and imagine that you are lying on a beautiful, peaceful beach. Imagine the sun on your face. Listen to the sounds of birds and waves. Feel the warm sand. Breathe deeply and slowly. Enjoy relaxing for several minutes. Then imagine yourself jogging, swimming, shopping, or anything you would enjoy doing on your vacation. When you are feeling better, open your eyes. Think of some small thing you can do to make things run more smoothly.



____ 6. Use your sense of humor. When I start to get frustrated and angry with my children, I hold a training session. For example, when the children have left lights on throughout the house, I may feel like screaming at them. Instead, I call them together and tell them that a crime has been committed. Someone has sneaked into the house and turned on all our lights. I suspect it may be an elephant. Maybe we could all hunt through the house looking for the elephant—and turn off lights. I am very careful to avoid sarcasm or hurt. I make my statements ridiculous so that everyone starts laughing, including me.

____ 7. Be sure you are keeping yourself strong. Are you eating well? Do you regularly get some exercise or relaxation? Make time in your schedule to keep yourself physically fit. For child care, you might take turns with a friend. Today you watch her children for an hour or two while she takes a break. Tomorrow she watches yours while you take a break.

____ 8. Draw strength from friends and family members. You may have some friends who help you make decisions, feel loved, and feel hopeful. Call them. Ask them if they will listen to you. Talk to them. Tell them how you feel. You may have some friends or family members who make you angrier or sadder. It might be good not to talk to them when you feel stressed. Anger makes stress worse.

____ 9. Focus on things you love to do. Go back to the list you made, and pick out some of the things you love to do most. Make time for them. Set aside money to do them. Ask people to help you do them.

____ 10. Anticipate problems and solve them. Deal with them. For example, maybe your toddler loves to play with the stereo, and that bothers you. Put the stereo up out of reach. Put interesting and safe toys where the children can play with them. Baby-proof your home. Make a special play area for your children. Prevent the troubles that drive you crazy by planning ahead.

____ 11. When you are feeling tired and discouraged and don't want to do anything, look for a little job. Maybe you could wipe off the cabinets. Maybe you could take out the trash. Look for a little job to get started. Once you finish the little job, give yourself credit for it. Don't beat yourself up with a long list of all the things you still need to do. Once you get started with a little job, you may feel like tackling bigger jobs.

____ 12. Deal with rejection. One powerful stress for most people is the feeling that no one cares. Maybe when you talk to your mother she only preaches to you. Maybe your husband or wife doesn't understand you or show respect for your feelings. Some researchers now tell us that the healthiest people are not necessarily those who had perfect childhoods but those who have made peace with their childhoods. Maybe Mom was not nice and maybe Dad deserted the family. But healthy people don't stay angry and upset with the past. They accept what has happened, and they live in the present. They accept what their parents have done and can do for them. They build good friendships.

____ 13. Get outside yourself. Sometimes we worry so much about our problems that we can't see anything else. It may help to take some cookies to the neighbor, to volunteer some time for a church or community group. You don't need a lot of extra demands. But taking a little time to help others can bring peace and satisfaction.

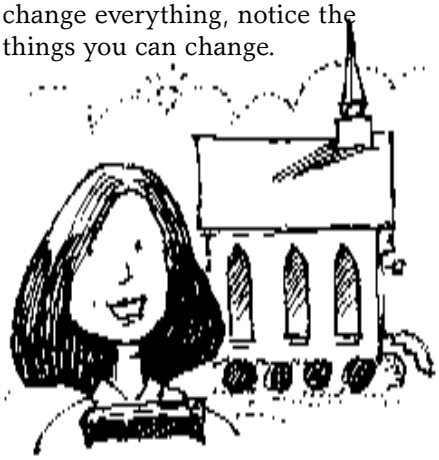
____ 14. Be creative. Organize to solve problems. Look for good solutions. For example, if your children are always cross by dinner-time, maybe you could provide them with a healthy afternoon treat. Or you could eat dinner earlier.

____ 15. Get help if you need it. If you begin to feel overwhelmed—especially if you feel suicidal—get help! Go to your minister or mental health clinic. Everyone gets discouraged from time to time. But if those feelings become severe, get help.

____ 16. Be patient. Some problems solve themselves with time. Eventually children outgrow diapers. They get past teething. The rain stops and the sun comes out. Work on the things you can change. Be patient with things that take time.

____ 17. Be a friend to yourself. Don't expect yourself to be perfect. Stop doing things that tear you down. Notice the good things you do, and dwell on those things. Don't try to force yourself to be perfect or always kind. Treat your feelings with respect. Other people may sound bigger and stronger and more sure of themselves. But your feelings are important. Listen to them. Instead of dwelling on a mistake, learn what you can from it and then let the mistake go. Examine the expectations you have for yourself. Check to be sure they are reasonable.

____ 18. Take control of your life. Helplessness is a terrible feeling. While you may not be able to change everything, notice the things you can change.



____ 19. Discover meaning in your life. Some people find meaning through religion, some through learning, some through service. Enjoy the contribution you make. See the purpose of people doing good.

____ 20. Don't compare yourself to others. Your sister may be a wonderful cook. Your neighbor may be incredibly organized. But don't compare yourself to them. No one has every talent. Discover your talents. Enjoy them. Use them to help others.

____ 21. Can you think of other ways you can deal with stress? If so, list them.

Others: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Make a stress plan.

As you have read over this list of ideas, have you marked those that seem helpful to you? Then you are ready to pick one of your stresses and come up with a plan for dealing with it. Don't plan how to deal with all of your stresses. Just start with one. The stress that I am going to start with is:

What I plan to do to prevent or deal with that stress: (Pick something from the list or use your own ideas.)

Do I need to involve others in helping me with my plan? How will I involve them?

What is my goal? How do I hope to change things?

After you have tried out your plan, see how well it works. Praise yourself for your success. Plan how to be successful in dealing with other stresses. You may want to keep this publication handy to remind you of ways to deal with stress.

As you make room in your life for things you love and replace stressful feelings with feelings of peace and calmness, you will find your personal and family life more satisfying. You are likely to find that you are more successful in your work, more effective with your children, and more at peace with yourself.

If you want to learn more . . .

Newman, Mildred, and Berkowitz, Bernard (1971). *How To Be Your Own Best Friend.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Just for fun . . .

Viorst, Judith (1972). *Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.* Hartford, Conn.: Atheneum.

This publication was originally written by H. Wallace Goddard, Extension Family and Child Development specialist, Auburn University, for the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service. It was adapted for use in Tennessee by Kathleen Rodgers, former Assistant Professor, Family Life.

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