

Stress and the Family System

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Family as a System

Families are groups of people who share close and personal relationships that change over time. One way of thinking about the family is to think of it as a system with moving parts where each part is dependent on one another in order to function smoothly. When the family works as a system, each person has specific roles and responsibilities that help other parts of the system — parents, siblings, and other family members — successfully fulfill their roles within the system. However, what happens when there is a part of the system that does not successfully fulfill its role? The other parts of the system cannot complete their duties and then the system begins to malfunction. A family is like a system — when parents cannot perform their duties, the children could be at risk and when the children cannot perform their tasks, that can put a strain on the parents. One of the most prominent issues for families is stress.

Family Stress: What is it?

Family stress is an interference in the normal functioning of the everyday family system. Family stress can manifest in different ways. When the stress manifests, those are called family stressors. Negative stressors can be a variety of things; for example, a family stressor could be financial troubles, a child with behavior issues, a divorce, or a military deployment. A positive stressor could be the birth of a child, a wedding, or relocating. A stressor can be anything that disrupts the balance of the family system. It is important to note that families will respond to stressors in different ways — some families may argue while others ignore one another and shut down, and there



are some families who have learned how to successfully handle their stress. Learning how to handle stress is an important skill for all members of a family system to learn. Here are five tips on how to handle family stress:

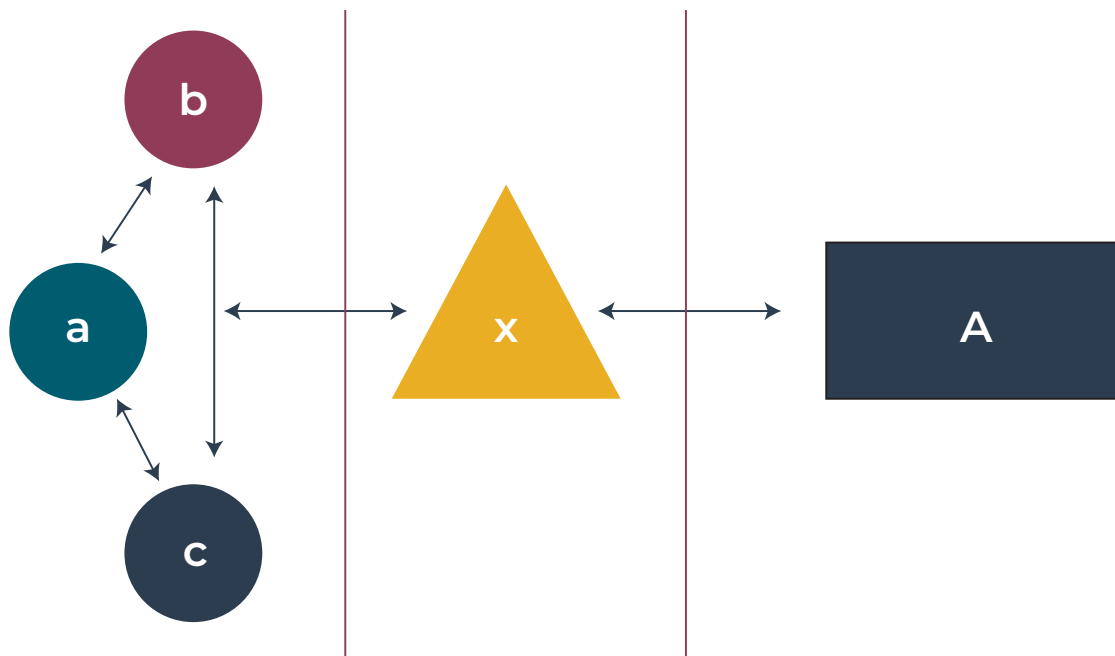
1. **Take a second.** Stress, either positive or negative, can take a toll on one's mental, physical, and emotional state. It is important to first process the stressor event by yourself to gauge where you are on the situation and allow yourself to embrace your feelings about the stressor.
2. **Pinpoint where the stress is coming from.** Being able to identify what exactly is causing the disruption in the family can help you to find solutions.
3. **Identify your support system.** Who will you go to when you need to talk? Who will help you and your family during this time? Identifying people who will be in your support circle will mitigate feelings of being alone during the stressful time and can be a source of comfort.
4. **Do some damage control.** Check in on the people who the stressor directly affected. If it was your spouse, then take time to talk to them

about how they are feeling. Then, talk to the other members of the family system to see how they are feeling about the event.

5. **Make sure to take care of your mental and physical health.** Get enough sleep, drink water, and eat nutritious foods. Depending on the stressor event(s), seek professional help. Some family stress is too much for the system to handle and may require the guidance of a professional.

Not only is it important to understand how to handle stress but also where stress comes from. The family stress process is a model that can be useful to families who are experiencing family stress. The family stress model has four main parts:

- **A: The stressor event.** This is the event that causes the disruption in the family system.
- **B: Resources.** What resources does the family have to help them navigate this stressful event?
- **C: Family's perception of the stressor.** How is the family taking this stressor? Do they see it as positive or negative stress? Are they worried or excited?
- **X: The likelihood of a crisis.** X is determined after looking at a, b, and c. The likelihood of a crisis depends on how stressful an event the family is facing, the resources the family has access to in order to help them with the stressor event, and their perception of the event.



a = stressor
 b = resources
 c = perception
 x = crisis
 A = pileup

There is also an additional level to this process and that is the snowball effect. Stress is not an isolated event. Often, there are stressful events that occur during or immediately following the initial stressful event. When this happens, it is important to recognize that the family is already working through one stressor and that it will be important to address which stressful event needs to be handled first.

Understanding the stress process and its manifestation can help families and family service professionals handle the stress in a productive way. Breaking down family stress into these four main categories and individually assessing each one can help the family learn about stress, find a positive solution, and grow together as a system.

Child Welfare and Stress

For many, children are an integral part of a family and their wellbeing is important. If children experience poor welfare, that can be a huge source of family system stress. Two examples of stressful situations regarding child welfare are youth in juvenile corrective services and crossover youth. When a child is in the juvenile justice system, not only are they impacted but so is the family. The family has to deal with social workers, the police, and the various departments of the system, along with the potential worry of losing their child. This is very similar to a child who enters the foster care system. What happens when a child is in both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system? This is called crossover youth. Crossover youth are a unique population of youth who experience both sides of an intricate coin.

These children and their families are experiencing the stress of dealing with the child welfare systems, such as the foster care system, and potentially the police or the department of corrections. Along with the immense stress these families face from these entities, they are probably also dealing with a snowball effect of stress from the school district and mental health concerns.

How you can help

If you believe that someone close to you could be experiencing any degree of family stress, there are a few things you can do. The first is to not pass judgement. Family stress comes in all shapes and sizes — what may not seem stressful to you, could be a traumatic and stressful experience to another person. Second, become a player in their support system. Experiencing stress can often be an emotional experience and affect many other aspects of life. Having a strong support system can better equip a family to handle the stress in a positive way. Lastly,

remember to actively listen to their concerns. Many times, people under severe family stress or stress in general are simply looking for a supportive person to whom they can express their concerns, worries, and thoughts. So actively listening to the family or family members who are under stress can have a positive impact.

If the family under stress needs more help than you can give, or is in crisis, help them connect to professionals who are trained to provide the specialized help they need. Your support and encouragement will still be needed.

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