

## Stress and the Family System

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### Lesson Objectives

After the completion of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Identify when a family system is experiencing a stressor event
- Understand and utilize the family stress process model
- Adopt new ways of handling family stress
- Acknowledge the risks of avoiding family stress

### Intended Audience

- Families! But specifically,
- Families who have had a history of family stress
- Parents or guardians with children or dependents in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems
- Human service professionals
  - Social workers
  - Daycare providers
  - School teachers

### Introduction & Importance

Dealing with family stress can be a difficult and delicate task. When educating community members about this topic it is important to remember that the people you will be working with are experiencing a lot of emotion and potential grief and/or trauma. Therefore, during the implementation or facilitation of this information, leaders should be sensitive toward the issues families are facing.

Family stress is a reality that many families face. When families face this type of stress, it not only affects



an individual but a whole system. Stress, when coupled with typical family processes and routines, can cause great distress for all involved.

### Preparation

- Read this leader's guide and the corresponding fact sheet (MF3486).
- Gather necessary materials for the activities listed below:
  - Paper
  - Writing materials
  - Copies of a blank stress process model (provided at the end of this lesson)
  - Trash can or bin
  - Optional: balloons, flour, cornstarch, or rice

Facilitators can pick and choose which discussions/activities they would like to use. It is suggested that the workshop be kept shorter than two hours and that the stress process model activity be used.

### Discussions and Activities

#### Workshop Format

1. What is stress?
  - Have participants come up with their own definition of what stress is. If this is done in a group, have them share and then the whole group can create their own definition of what stress is.

2. How do they currently handle stress?
  - People handle stress in a variety of different ways. Have the participants identify the ways in which they handle stress both individually and as a family. Once they have written those, have them identify which ones they believe are healthy and which are unhealthy. This activity can prompt a discussion about how stress management techniques can either be harmful or hurtful. The leader can then educate the families about helpful stress management techniques using the tips from the fact sheet.

3. What stresses them out?
  - Have participants write down what brings their families stress. For each item that stresses them out, have them write it on an individual piece of paper. Once that is complete, have the participants discuss what they have written down. How many of their pieces of paper indicate negative stressors and how many indicate positive stressors? Often, participants only think of negative stress when asked this question. Take this opportunity to educate the families about positive and negative stress and how to differentiate between the two.

4. What is the process of stress?
  - This activity and discussion will be done primarily as a group. As the facilitator, provide families with a printout of the stress model. Go through each step and explain what it is and how it contributes to the final step: either a crisis or avoidance of a crisis. From there, discuss with the families how this model can be helpful to use when they are experiencing a crisis. Once the conversation is over, have the families fill out the blank stress process model and see how they would fare if they were to face a crisis at that moment.

#### For at home

1. How does stress affect our family?
  - a. During dinner or a family meeting, have all the members of your family discuss how they think their individual stress has an impact on the family as a unit. This will bring awareness to the whole family about

how each person perceives their own stress and then how they believe it affects their family.

2. What do you do when you are stressed?
  - a. Each person handles stress differently. One way to help family members identify how they manage stress is to have them log when they are stressed and what their initial reaction was for a week. Then come back together as a family and discuss. Sharing with others how you manage stress not only helps you recognize it but will help you identify when the members of your family are stressed as well.
3. Make a stress ball. (This activity can be done at home or with a facilitator.)
  - a. It is important to recognize stress and manage it but sometimes stress does not totally go away. Therefore, it is important to learn how to reduce it. One option is to create an object, in this case a stress ball, that people can use when they are feeling stressed. To make the stress ball you will need balloons, a small funnel, and some sort of material to fill the balloon with. Options for filling are flour, cornstarch, rice, or shaving cream.
  - b. Everyone picks a balloon and then uses the funnel to fill the balloon with their choice of filling material. If younger children or persons with disabilities is participating, assistance may be needed.
  - c. Have participants or family members lightly talk about stress while they are creating their stress balls. Explain to the participants or family members how this object can be useful and how it is an alternative to shouting or physical violence when stressed.

#### **Community Educator Role: How You Can Help**

As a community educator and leader, your role in identifying stress and helping families manage their stress is simple: be a support system. Your role in your community is integral and people look to you for education and guidance. You can use the helpful tips, the family stress model, and the other information in this fact sheet to help your local families navigate their family stress.

## Reviewers

**Tristen Cope**, Marion County Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Science,  
4-H Youth Development

**Dr. Anthony** Ferraro, Assistant Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services

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# Evaluation

## Stress and the Family System

Thank you for taking time to participate in our program. We are always looking to improve our program and in order to do that, we would like your feedback. Below are a few questions that will help us better understand how we can make our program better. Your participation is in this survey voluntary. The information you provide will only be used to evaluate our program and your identity will be kept confidential. Again, thank you for participating in our program. The questions are below.

1. As a result of this program, did you learn anything new about stress?  
 Yes     No
2. Did this program help you understand what family stress is?  
 Yes     No     A little
3. Did this program help you understand how to manage and cope with family stress?  
 Yes     No     A little
4. Do you plan on sharing the information you learned with your family or friends?  
 Yes     No
5. In a typical month, how often does your family experience family stress?  
 Always     Often     Sometimes     Seldom     Never
6. For the following items, please select your level of agreement by marking the appropriate box.

After participating in this program:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I understand what family stress is.					
I know ways that I can cope/manage my stress.					
I understand the ABC-X model of family stress.					
I understand how I can help others if they experience family stress.					

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

My biological sex

- Male     Female     Prefer not to respond

My race

- American Indian or Alaska Native     Black or African American     Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
 Asian     White     Prefer not to respond

My ethnicity

- Hispanic/Latino     Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino     Prefer not to respond

Marital status

- Married     Single     Single living with partner     Widowed     Separated or divorced  
 Prefer not to respond     Other not listed

If you are willing to be contacted after the completion of this program for a follow-up conversation, please list your first and last name, phone number, and email below.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you again for participating in our survey!