

# Work...

## RESPONSIBILITY. DEMANDS. EXPECTATIONS. STRESS.

Juggling home, work, child care, school and children's activities can result in numerous opportunities to experience stress. Multiple demands leave many families feeling overwhelmed and out of control. But is work the villain that robs us of calm, family time, and sanity? Does work lead to stress? Or, do all the expectations in our lives create the stress?

Anyone who has been a fulltime parent or caregiver knows there is plenty of demands and stress without being paid to work. On the other hand, a friend in poor health once observed "You do not realize what a blessing work is until someone tells you that you can never do it again."



We are meant to work, whether it is at home, on the job, or on our hobbies. Our minds and bodies thrive when utilized and die when not. So, why do so many people crave a less stressful life and blame work for their stress? The truth is, when multiple priorities compete, small stressors can build up and affect our feelings about both work and home life. Stress can impede our ability to meet our own needs and the needs of others. It also influences our relationships, parenting, and our children's behavior. Thus, having an understanding of stress and practicing useful strategies to decompress has benefits for both your family and work life.

### STRESS AFFECTS OUR BEHAVIOR.

Have you noticed that when you feel stressed, you tend to react to others differently—yell at your children, fight with your partner, lash out at a friend or shut down? As a parent, do you find under stress you may parent in ways you vowed you *never* would? There is a reason for this.

Stress is a natural psychological and physiological response. When a stress trigger occurs, the message gets to the emotional part of the brain first. Sometimes, before the reasoning part of your brain can decide on an intentional response, the emotional part reacts. This is for our survival: if a car is heading directly toward us, our emotional reaction quickly springs us into action. However, we can experience negative results when we react to a stressful work or home situation with instant emotional reactions. That is why even taking ten seconds to breathe prior to reacting to a coworker or child may change our response to a more favorable one.

### STRESS AFFECTS OUR CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR.

Stress reactions occur in both parents and children. Have you detected that the one day it is REALLY important to get out of the house on time, your child falls apart? This is often the child's response to tension and an elevated cortisol level (a stress hormone). If your cortisol level increases, so will the cortisol level of others in your presence. When you experience pressure and anxiety, so does your child.

### WHAT BRINGS CHILDREN STRESS

Other things beyond parent stress raise a child's stress level. When children experience a taxing day, they tend to react as adults do—fall apart over little things and not work as well with others. When a child is reacting to stress, he often cannot do something he could previously do or suddenly won't do something that he would normally do readily: an

eight year old suddenly can't choose a pair of socks to wear; a four year old has a toileting "accident."

Both negative and positive events may cause stress. For many young children, separation from a parent creates a lot of anxiety. Depending on your child's temperament, changes in routine, quick transitions, or an over-stimulating environment can also be a strain.

Even the best child care or preschool can increase a child's stress levels. Imagine getting up in the morning, rushing to a fun and wonderful day with many other friends and learning new and exciting things. For nine hours. For five days in a row. You are surrounded by "friends" with the social skills of preschoolers who may take all *your* things, push or bite you, and refuse to play what or how you want to play. You are required to listen, sit, wash up, eat, and learn — usually when someone else wants you to. Sometimes, after this long day, you even get to go out at night to another fun activity where there are more expectations and rules.

Preschool experiences will bring many rewards. But, by the end of the day, how would you feel? How high would your stress level be? How much ability would you have to cope? What would you need?

### STRATEGIES TO MANAGE STRESS

All families experience stress. The key is to manage stress so that it does not become your way of life. Taking time to decompress can keep you on track and help you and your family avoid blow ups and emotional first reactions. Children are great imitators. So, when you choose healthy ways to work through stress you will teach your child to do the same. In 5-10 minutes, you may be able to reenergize and lower tension levels for you and your child. Take the time to unwind!

Multiple commitments, children, activities, and a job can all be a rewarding part of life when stress is managed.

### WORK... ACHIEVE. BRING ABOUT. DO. ENJOY.

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## TIPS TO UNWIND

- **Prevention is key.** It is much easier if you heed the warning signs. Catch yourself or your child early and practice stress release techniques before breakdown occurs.
- **Offer support and encouragement.** It is often much easier to support her when she falls and skins her knee. A difficult emotional moment can be just as difficult and also needs assistance.

### Stress release techniques for adults or children:

- **Self-massage** – shoulders, neck, head, lower back. Rub lotion on your hands.
- **Spend 5 minutes out doors**
- **Draw a picture**
- **Participate in any kind of physical activity** (run, walk, jump, swing, bounce, rock).
- **Take a hot bath or shower**
- **Lie down and visualize something you love** (favorite vacation spot, floating in water, etc.)
- **Read a book**
- **Love.** Sit with your loved ones and just allow yourself let go of all the other things. Focus on your child or partner. Ask them questions about their day. Listen.

### Children's signs of stress and stress release activities:

When children start to feel stress, they may whine, bite their fingernails, grind teeth, fuss, regress, complain of stomach or headaches, and experience increased fearfulness, over-eating, and sleep difficulties. If stress build up and the resulting blowup occurs, below are some common ideas for stress release activities. Consider the type of blowup experienced and seek the most effective method for working through it. For example, if a child is shutting down, you would avoid talking. A helpful technique would be to reduce input in the environment.

REACTIONS TO STRESS	FIGHT (Lash out)	FLIGHT (Shut down or withdraw)	TEND/BEFRIEND (Pull close, talk)
STRESS SIGNALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hit, bit, or kick, push</li> <li>• Tantrum</li> <li>• Yell</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of appetite</li> <li>• Fall on floor</li> <li>• Become non-responsive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whine or become clingy</li> <li>• Suck their thumb</li> <li>• Grab a "lovey"</li> </ul>
STRESS RELEASE ACTIVITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rock in a rocking chair</li> <li>• Physical movement</li> <li>• Squeeze play dough, clay, or a stress ball</li> <li>• Stretch</li> <li>• Divert energy elsewhere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a step back and give him/her a break</li> <li>• Lay down and breathe quietly</li> <li>• Lower stimulation in environment</li> <li>• Remove from situation</li> <li>• Distract</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to a friend</li> <li>• Sing a song</li> <li>• Massage shoulders</li> <li>• Hug</li> <li>• Write in a journal</li> </ul>

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