

PARENTS

# Taking Care of Ourselves



CENTER FOR  
Early Childhood  
Mental Health  
Consultation

Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development

# Activity 1



Stress is a physical, mental or emotional response to events that cause bodily or mental tension.

## Knowing Your Stressors and the Signs of Stress

When you are stressed, it is easy to react before even realizing you have reached a point of stress. In order for caregivers to successfully reduce their levels of stress and the impact it has on themselves and the children they care for, they must first recognize their stressors or “primary pressure points”.

In the spaces provided, answer the following questions:

**What is stress?**

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**What causes me stress?**

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**How do I know when I’ve reached a point of stress?**

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# Activity 2

## Taking Care of Yourself

Sometimes you can make choices about how you spend your time that will actually prevent or reduce stress in your life. Here you will find suggestions for strategies that can help you avoid stress or cope with stress. If you take care of yourself, you will be in a better position to take care of others!

### During Pregnancy

- Now that you are eating for two (or more), this is not the time to diet or cut calories. In order for baby to develop in a healthy way, make sure to not skip meals or try a new weight loss diet. You should eat about 300 calories extra per day or follow your doctor's suggestions.
- Try to eat in a healthy, well-balanced way. Here are some pointers to help you stay on track:
  - **What do you love to eat? How can you make sure that this is healthy for you and baby?** List some healthy options here:

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- Talk with your doctor or clinic about prenatal vitamins. Since baby is growing all the time, he needs extra help from vitamins like iron, calcium, and folic acid).
- Keep in mind that you're also drinking for two (or more) now. Drinking lots of water can be helpful to both you and baby. Keeping a glass of water next to your bed and couch will make it easier and more convenient to stay hydrated.
- Exercise is very important. The activities that you do should be "low-impact activities" like walking or swimming can help to keep your energy up, prevent excess weight gain, and help you sleep.
  - **What kinds of exercise will you do to maintain your health during pregnancy?** List some ideas here:

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- Sleep, sleep, and sleep! Since your body is working hard to accommodate your growing baby, you will probably feel more tired than usual, especially in the first few months of pregnancy. Trying to maintain a regular sleep schedule will help you feel less sluggish and more ready to start the day.
  - As baby grows, finding a comfortable sleep position may get harder. Try lying on your side with your knees bent. A pillow between your legs can also help.
- While you're pregnant, it is important to stay away from things you normally might not have to. These include alcohol, cigarettes, recreational drugs of any kind, and caffeine. This last one may seem strange, but caffeine (that can be found in coffee, tea, and sodas) can put growing baby's health in danger.

## Activity 2

### Taking Care of Yourself



The quality of infant relationships is heavily dependent upon the caregiver's physical and mental well-being, and shapes the basis for all future relationships.

### Right After Birth

- Since many babies will probably not have a routine sleep schedule for the first few months, try to rest quietly or sleep when baby sleeps. These times throughout the day (if only a few minutes) will add up and you will feel more rested.
- Try to keep baby's crib close to your bed to save energy and time during nighttime feeding and changing. Place the materials you need so they are easy to find and you can keep the lights low during nighttime feedings and changing.
- Remember to eat! With everything else going on, this may slip your mind, but baby can't be healthy unless you are. Try to eat balanced, healthier meals and snacks that are high in protein and low in fat whenever you feel hungry. Smaller, more frequent meals are best. Another part of maintaining physical health is eating well.

- **What do you usually eat for breakfast?** List some healthy options here:

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- **How about lunch options that you can make and bring to work?** List some ideas here:

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- **What can you eat for snacks that you can prepare and transport easily?** List some options here:

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- A healthy dinner can be one of the most challenging meals in a busy family. **What are some ideas that you can use to make sure your dinners are healthy?**

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- Try to get a good workout a few times per week. Physical exercise will reduce your stress and increase 'endorphins' which lift your mood.

- **What are some exercises you can do to keep healthy?** List them here:

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## Activity 2



### Common Signs and Symptoms of Stress

#### COGNITIVE

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Continuous worrying
- Racing thoughts

#### EMOTIONAL

- Feeling down
- Feeling overwhelmed
- High level of irritability (short temper)
- Inability to relax

#### PHYSICAL

- Excessive perspiration
- Chest pains/elevated heart rate
- Frequent colds or illness
- Nausea, dizziness or headaches

#### BEHAVIORAL

- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Nervous habits (nail biting)
- Difficulty sleeping or irregular sleep patterns
- Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax

## Taking Care of Yourself

### RIGHT AFTER BIRTH CONTINUED

- If you are breastfeeding, extra fluids are just as important as healthy eating. It is a good idea to keep a fresh pitcher of water next to your bed or breastfeeding chair. You can even flavor the water with a strawberry, orange or other fruit!
- When breast feeding, baby eats and drinks everything you do. Monitor your alcohol consumption, high calorie sugary drinks, and eating unhealthy foods.
- If possible, invite a friend or relative over to help with daily tasks or to play with baby while you take a shower or pump breast milk. Not worrying about the dishes or the laundry will allow you to really focus on baby.
- When baby keeps crying and you are feeling overwhelmed, try these:
  - Focus on taking deep, soothing breaths to calm down. You can find relaxation audio recordings at [www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____).
  - If you are getting too frustrated, hand baby over to your partner/spouse/friend/relative and take a break.
  - Asking for help is perfectly ok. Baby will not be soothed if you are angry or upset.
  - Remember that this will not last forever! Babies generally cry the most during their first few months.
- Surrounding yourself with other new parents can help you feel supported and less overwhelmed. You can talk honestly with them about the challenges of being a parent of a young baby, and share ideas and tips for strategies that are working for you.
- Finally, nurture and take care of yourself too. A 30 minute bath, a walk outside with a friend, or just some alone time can really help brighten your spirits.

## With a Mobile Infant

- Even young infants can understand and respond to your feelings, so it's important to maintain your own physical and mental health. Partners, spouses, friends, and parents can be a big help to you by helping share the load and helping you feel loved and supported
- As baby is becoming more mobile, more energy will be required of you too! This means making sure you keep up good eating and exercise habits.
- "Me time" is still necessary. Try to incorporate something that calms you (a bath, listening to your favorite music) into the day.
- Take time to interact with other parents of infants. Sharing your observations about baby's development, as well as triumphs and challenges with others who understand can be rewarding.
- As baby grows, sleep patterns will become more regular. Keep trying to sleep when baby does so you can maintain your energy.

## Activity 2



Providing care to young children is an intense and demanding job. It can become increasingly difficult when combined with relationship, financial or other stressful concerns.

### Taking Care of Yourself

#### With a Toddler

- Toddlers require that you have a lot of energy to keep up!. Maintaining healthy eating and exercise habits is very important.
- Help reduce stress (for you and your toddler) by creating routines. Consistent morning, eating, changing/toileting, and bedtime routines will make it easier on you and help toddler feel secure.
- Taking some time to childproof spaces within your home (like adding child-proof locks to cabinets, putting plastic plugs on top of electrical outlets, putting safety gates at top and bottom of stairs) will help you feel safer as toddler explores
- Sleep is still vital. Toddlers will have more regular sleep patterns than infants, so take advantage of this to get your rest.
- Caring for a toddler can be stressful. Make sure you have someone (like a spouse, relative, or close friend) to turn to when you're having a hard time.
- Toddlers are very social! Take your toddler to a park or local farmers market and make new friends by talking to parents of other children. This is a time the two of you can enjoy together.
- Make an effort to get out of the house regularly, maintain friendships, and enjoy yourself. These will help keep you healthy and ready to care for your toddler.

# Activity 3

## Developing an Individualized Action Plan

Learning to manage stress in a healthy way may not come naturally. When starting any new behavior, it is important to develop a strategy for using it ahead of time in order to increase the chances of using the new behavior successfully. Make a plan for change. Think about one thing that causes you stress and one sign you know you are stressed. Then list a technique you will use for dealing with your stress in a healthy way.

### For Example:

When [**my stressor**] (*the baby cries for longer than 5 minutes*) and I begin to feel [**sign of stress**] (*my heart race*), I will [**technique to use**] (*breathe deeply to calm down*).

### My Individualized Action Plan

When [**my stressor**] \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
begin to feel [**sign of stress**] \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will [**technique to use**] \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

When [**my stressor**] \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
begin to feel [**sign of stress**] \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will [**technique to use**] \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

When [**my stressor**] \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
begin to feel [**sign of stress**] \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will [**technique to use**] \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

When [**my stressor**] \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
begin to feel [**sign of stress**] \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will [**technique to use**] \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.