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Parenting the Preschooler

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Parent Self-Care

As a parent of a preschooler, you have stress: lack of time, lack of money, and probably lack of sleep – and that’s just a start! Stress results when you feel you don’t have the resources to meet the demands.

Here’s an example.

- ◆ You’re exhausted from a trying day at work.
- ◆ It’s your turn to prepare dinner.
- ◆ A couple loads of laundry need to be done this evening.
- ◆ When you arrive home, your child seems upset and is fussy. You know that taking some time to hold the little one would probably help.
- ◆ An unexpected bill is in the mail, and no money to pay it, frosts the cake!

You’re exhausted so it seems you don’t have the physical energy (resource) to face your evening. Dinner and laundry press your time resources. Your child draws on your emotional resources. Financial resources add another pressure. In this situation, you’re likely to feel stressed because several resources are being taxed.

When you’re stressed, three things happen:

- ⇒ sensitivity increases
- ⇒ thought processes are affected
- ⇒ behavior changes

These three changes are related to the physical stress response, the chemical change that prepares your body to meet the demands you’re facing.

Increased sensitivity, a heightened state of alert, helps you monitor existing threats and become aware of new ones. However, increased sensitivity can show up as impatience to loud sounds or other

strong reactions to what you are sensing such as a child crying, a sibling squabble, or a blaring tv.

Stress affects your **thought processes** initially by narrowing your focus and later by the inability to focus. Think of a time when you had an argument with someone and couldn’t get it out of your mind. (That’s a narrow focus.) Or if you don’t address a stressful work day at or soon after work, you might be distracted and find it hard to focus on your family’s needs. With long-term or high stress, you can lose focus or find it difficult to make decisions.

Stress affects your **behavior**. When stressed, you’re more likely to be irritable, find yourself eating more or not being hungry, sleeping more or having trouble sleeping, and/or increasing your use of alcohol, other drugs, caffeine, nicotine, or sugar. Following a trying work situation and facing additional demands at home, you might resort to some of these behaviors. With long-term or high stress, behavior changes can become more serious and the help of a counselor or therapist is needed.

Recognizing one or more of these three stress signs is a reminder to make different choices and practice extra stress self-care.

When you are stressed, you can reduce demands or increase resources. Ways to reduce demands include getting help from others (even children) with household chores, deciding that some chores can be ignored, and/or simplifying your life. Increasing resources includes working on a positive attitude, maintaining a sense of humor, connecting with others in your community, and/or learning to use the power of relaxation techniques.

De-Stressing for Parents

You can't eliminate stress from your life, but health, happiness, creativity, and productivity suffers if you don't find ways to balance your stress load. Balance is achieved by turning off the stress response and turning on the relaxation response. Practice self-care techniques that trigger relaxation to protect and build up physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual resources. Here are some methods:

- **BREATHE** - a few deep diaphragmatic breaths instantly calm us. Take long, slow breaths where you can feel your abdomen pushing out rather than shallow breaths that only expand your upper chest.
- **BODY SCAN** – practice deep muscle relaxation. Here are some examples:
 - Wrinkle your forehead by trying to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for five seconds. Relax.
 - Close your eyes as tightly as you can for 5 seconds. Relax.
 - Shrug your shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax.Note the way your muscles feel when they're relaxed. You can do this from head to toe by tensing then relaxing each area of your body. Feel the warmth and calmness in each relaxed area. With practice, you can sense tension in your body and consciously relax tight muscles to ease the effects of stress.
- **CALM YOUR SENSORY PATHWAYS** – you perceive stress through the physical senses (taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell). Calming techniques sooth our senses and relieve heightened sensitivity. Here are some ideas:
 - Taste – healthy food and beverage choices including at least one good, balanced meal each day during high stress times; chocolate is okay as an occasional stress reliever but keep it minimal, as sugar stresses the body.
 - Touch - hugs, holding hands, a warm bath, or therapeutic massage.

- Sight – being with or thinking about someone or some place you love; orderly surroundings; candle light or soft lighting.
- Sound – music, quiet or silence, nature sounds
- Smell – aromatherapy (choose pure essential oils over artificial scents as the pure oils are less likely to trigger allergies; rose, lavender, and bergamot are three oils that have uplifting affects. Of course, keep essential oils away from children.)

- **REFOCUS YOUR THOUGHTS** – to counter the narrow focus of the stress response, find an activity that takes your full attention. Playing with your children is one idea. Doing a puzzle, gardening or other hobbies also work. Meditation or prayer and mindfulness (focusing totally on the present moment and its sights, sounds, and smells) are also excellent ways to refocus and clear your mind.

Parenting young children makes for a busy life and it can be hard to imagine fitting in one more thing; self-care seems to be a luxury for another time or other people. Remember though, if you don't take care of yourself first, you won't be able to take care of others for very long. Practicing regular stress self-care can help you avoid destructive behavior changes and build resources to meet daily demands.

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