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Thriving in Today's Times: Stress and the Family

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Family stress can be defined as “a real or imagined imbalance between the demands on the family and the family’s ability to meet those demands” (National Ag Safety Database and Clemson Extension 2002). Stress can cause families to worry, to feel anxiety, depression, and sadness. Family fights, arguments, and frustrations can often grow in frequency and intensity when stress is high.

For example, Susan and Doug, the mother and father of a typical South Dakota family, worry that the economy will drastically affect their ability to take care of their family. They become very worried and more and more frustrated as the family’s financial problems mount. As the bills become harder to pay, the couple begins to snap at each other (see ExEx14059, “Thriving in Today’s Times: Stress and Marriage”). Then the children pick up on the tension and act out, yelling and fighting with each other more often than normal. They have trouble sleeping, and they may get into trouble at school (see ExEx14060, “Thriving in Today’s Times: Recognizing and Addressing Your Child’s Fears”). Is Susan and Doug’s family an unusually dark example? No. It’s a fairly common one.

But Susan and Doug and all families can take steps to alleviate stress before it gets the better of them. Although they can’t control many of the outside forces that affect their families, they can control how they handle stress. The first step is to understand the symptoms of stress, which can manifest itself in physical, mental, and social problems.

Physical symptoms include stomachaches, fatigue, headaches, a racing heart, and sleeplessness. The use of

drugs and alcohol often increases. The number and severity of farm accidents can increase.

Mental symptoms include feelings of worthlessness, depression, irritability, and anxiety. Crying jags, bad tempers, and mood swings become more frequent.

Emotional symptoms of stress include social isolation, bitterness, loneliness, decreased sex drive, and poor relationship management.

If anyone in the family exhibits any of these symptoms, it’s time to act. The second step in controlling stress is to identify its source and decide if there’s anything that can be done to handle it. The family obviously can’t control the economy, for example, but it can control the way the family members cope with it and make a plan of how to meet the new demands.

One of the best ways to cope with stress is to be prepared ahead of time. You may not be able to control the situation that brought the stress, but you can handle yourselves and your reactions to the stress. For example, in a poor economy, have each family member decide how they can individually save money. Your preschool child checking out books from the library instead of buying a new toy, or your teenager taking his lunch to school instead of eating out are some ways even children can help in a time of crisis.

Prevention of stress strengthens the family. Since stress can affect all family members, all of them should be ac-

tively involved in preventing and coping with family stress. Thus, sitting around the table and discussing family issues such as chores, responsibilities, finances, roles, and emotions should be initiated in times when there is little stress affecting the family. This is the time to answer questions and set priorities.

Is family time important? Are the rules of communication, such as respect for each other's feelings and fears, taught to the children at a young age? And then do the adults respect the feelings and fears of the children? Are the parents taking time to communicate and support each other? Research indicates that families who openly communicate their feelings and anxieties often cope better during a time of crisis.

Families need to be resilient—able to bounce up again when stress hits—according to the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. Components of resiliency include problem-solving communication, flexibility, hope, family time, routines, and social support. In other words, the members of strong families are connected to each other. They are involved in each other's lives. They promote open communication within the family. They support each other's efforts to cope with the crisis, and they understand that different people cope differently. They have high "family hardiness," the ability to attack a problem by working together as a team. They are proactive problem solvers, knowing there may be more than one way to handle the problem. They are connected to their communities and are willing to explore resources and help their neighbors and communities can offer. They also are willing to extend help to others in crisis.

Family strength is not only important for the prevention of overwhelming stress; it is also extremely important in coping with overwhelming stress. Coping is how a family uses its personal, familial, and community resources. Coping mechanisms can include a positive or optimistic attitude and a willingness to explore resources and to accept help, to give help, and to be flexible in adapting to the stressful situation. Families with positive coping skills are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, are involved in decision making, are willing to give and use support. They think positively.

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