

HELPING CHILDREN COPE In Times of Stress

Family stress rises when times get tough. Health crisis, financial stress, disruption to normal daily routines, uncertainty about national issues, and more can cause stress for children and adults.

Whatever changes tough times bring, all family members feel the impact.



Discuss feelings and concerns as a family.

Communication has two parts – talking and listening. Each must occur for communication to be successful.

As families undergo changes in their lives and experience stress, they need to talk about them. According to Gerald Kaplan, Harvard psychologist, people who are not ashamed to express fears, anxieties and sorrows and to seek help from others, deal with crisis the most successfully. **Children who learn this at a young age will be more likely to cope with stress as adults.**

Being able to **discuss and vent** angry, anxious, or disappointed feelings can help keep those feelings from creating more severe problems, such as emotional difficulties, family violence or alcohol abuse.

Listening is as important as talking. Everyone needs someone to listen to them, someone who supports them and allows them to openly express feelings. The listener should not feel obligated to advise, analyze or have all the answers. Listening and responding with concern and understanding may be all the help that is needed.

Open communication within the family is vital to good relationships. In some families, **listening without judging** is difficult because we want to help, but have strong feelings and opinions. Taking the extra effort to actively listen is important.



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HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE

You can help your children best by first helping yourself. Try to gain control of your own stress; then you are ready to help your children.

Provide your children with information about the situation in a way that is within the child's understanding. Engage in conversations about what is occurring, how your family is responding, and address any concerns or questions your children may have.

Recognize symptoms of stress that may affect your children: sleeplessness, diarrhea, withdrawal, headaches, and/or angry outbursts. Encourage the child to share feelings and fears. If social distancing policies are in effect, attempt to reach these supports by phone, email, or other virtual means.

Strive to maintain routines and normalcy as much as possible. Children thrive on structure as it provides stability and safety. Engage your children in enjoyable, relaxing activities to reduce the symptoms of stress.

Maintain health habits. Promote balanced diets, get adequate rest and plenty of exercise to guard against health problems and promote overall well-being.

Help your children focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Look at family and personal strengths and draw on talents and contributions of all family members. Consider starting a daily reflection, perhaps at family mealtime, where all family members share something positive about the situation or their day.

During difficult times, family communication is essential. Implement regular family meetings and have discussions about what you are doing well in managing the difficult situation. Work as a family to come up with an action plan that includes each person's ideas and experiences.

Spend family time together doing low-cost or no-cost activities. There are many creative, inexpensive, and fun activities that families can do together to reduce stress. Involve all family members in the activity planning. One idea is to appoint one family member each day as the "Family Activity Director" who has the responsibility of coming up with the daily family fun activity.

Reference: Adapted from "Getting Through Tough Financial Times." How Do We Communicate with Our Children about These Economically Stressful Times? - Getting Through Tough Financial Times - University of Illinois Extension, https://web.extension.illinois.edu/toughtimes/communicating_with_children.cfm

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