

Stress Coping Strategies

Parents with mild to moderate levels of stress can use a variety of coping strategies. These strategies are common sense approaches, but they may also require the assistance of a mental health professional to help the individual develop the necessary skills. The coping strategies are as follows:

1. **Relax:** Learn to relax your body through various relaxation procedures. It may be helpful to consult professional publications and/or a mental health professional to learn specific relaxation strategies.
2. **Take time away from children and family:** It can be rejuvenating to schedule time for yourself to pursue an activity or interest. You may need to arrange for a babysitter, or, if there are two parents, you might take turns caring for your children so that each parent can get out occasionally.
3. **Take time to be with your spouse/partner (if applicable):** If parents spend time with each other without their children around, they may improve their relationship.
4. **Seek out social support:** Parents who are feeling overwhelmed and isolated could benefit from seeking out active support from other family members, neighbors, or mental health professionals. This support could involve getting babysitters, talking and sharing feelings with friends or family members, asking for help from friends or family members, getting individual therapy, and so forth.
5. **Schedule pleasant events:** Stress can be relieved by scheduling specific pleasant events the you will participate in. For example, it may be pleasant to schedule going to a concert, going out to dinner with a friend, going to the park with your children, going to a baseball game with your son or daughter, and so forth.
6. **Develop good health habits:** It is universally accepted that increasing one's exercise level, eating a healthy diet, getting enough rest, and relaxing periodically can improve one's ability to cope with stress. Consult professional publications and/or a physician regarding a health promotion program for you.
7. **Utilize effective problem solving:** If you find yourself continually dealing with the same problems, then utilizing problem-solving strategies could be helpful. We will review family problem solving and how to train children to utilize problem solving. Parents may benefit from these skills. A parent may want to consult with a mental health professional for more information on improving problem-solving skills.
8. **Learn to think more accurately and rationally:** Often our stress is caused by the way we think about ourselves, others, and the events of life. You can learn how to reevaluate and change thoughts. We will focus on changing

STAYING CALM

1. Recognize Stress—Be aware of stress "signals."

Body signals

- Breathing/heart rate increased / blood
- Tense muscles
- Increased sweating
- Face turns red
- Body feels hot
- migraines
- Difficulty focusing eyes
- Shaking
- Body going numb

Thought signals

- "That brat!"
- "I'm not going to take any more!"
- "I'm a worthless parent."
- "I can't handle this!"
- "I hate him/her."
- "I give up."
- "I thought I was done w/this"

Action signals

- Punch/hit
- Yell/threaten
- Cry
- Tremble
- Withdraw

2. Relax Your Body—Do deep breathing, tense and release muscles, count to 10, and so forth.

3. Use "Coping Self-Talk"—Examples of coping self-talk include the following:

- "Take it easy."
- "Don't let it bug you."
- "I can handle this."
- "I'm going to be OK."
- "Stay cool."
- "Relax."
- "I'll try my best."
- "Patience!"
- "Help!"

4. Taking Effective Action—Walk away, ignore it, take a walk, try to discuss it, express feelings, use problem solving, and so forth.

thoughts related to one's child and parenting abilities. However, it can also be beneficial to learn how to think more rationally about oneself. Again, you may want to consider consulting professional publications and/or a counselor to learn about how to think more accurately and rationally.

9. **Learn to control anger:** Parents often get very angry at their child or spouse (partner) when dealing with behavior problem children. Learning to control and deal with one's anger appropriately can be helpful. If anger is a big problem for you, it is recommended that you consult a mental health professional.
10. **Spend time with your child:** Spend time with your child to build a quality relationship. You will have fewer problems getting along if you schedule special time with them.
11. **Join a parent support group:** These groups can focus on skills training, but also allow parents to share "war stories" and obtain support from each other. Many parents comment that the support and opportunity to share experiences/ideas are very beneficial (sometimes more beneficial than skills training!). If you have a child with serious, chronic behavior problems, you may benefit from joining a parent support group. Consult with a local mental health professional or social service agency about such group in your community.
12. **Plan lifestyle changes:** The above examples of stress management really involve changing one's lifestyle. Changing a lifestyle involves effort and planning to make it work. One helpful strategy might be for the parents to sit down together each Sunday and plan the following week to include stress management activities and priorities. For example, both parents may schedule an evening out, mom may schedule visiting her sister one evening, scheduling time to exercise or special time to spend with each child, and so forth.
13. **Take parent stress management seriously:** You cannot really help your child unless you are healthy yourself. Take time to take care of yourself, and you will be better able to care for your child.

UNHELPFUL PARENT THOUGHTS

Listed below are a variety of common thoughts that parents of children with behavior problems may have. Read each thought and indicate how frequently that thought (or a similar thought) typically occurs for you over an average week. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Use the 5-point rating scale to help you answer these questions.

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Sometimes	Moderately often	All the time	Often

Unhelpful Thoughts about the Child

1. ___ My child is behaving like a brat.
2. ___ My child acts up on purpose.
3. ___ My child is the cause of most of our family problems.
4. ___ My child is just trying to get attention.
5. ___ My child's future is bleak. When he/she grows up, he/she will probably be irresponsible, a criminal, a high school dropout, and so forth.
6. ___ My child should behave like other children. I shouldn't have to make allowances for my child.
7. ___ My child must do well in school, sports, scouts, and so forth. It is unacceptable if my child does not do well in these activities.
8. ___ My child has many problems. My child does not fit in with other children, and so forth.

Unhelpful Thoughts about Self/Others

9. ___ It is my fault that my child has a problem.
10. ___ If I wasn't such a poor parent, my child would be better off.
11. ___ It is his/her fault (other parent) that my child is this way.
12. ___ If he/she (other parent) wasn't such a poor parent, my child would be better off.
13. ___ Our family is a mess.
14. ___ I can't make mistakes in parenting my child.
15. ___ I give up. There is nothing more I can do for my child.
16. ___ I have no control over my child. I have tried everything, and so forth.
17. ___ The teacher is more of a problem than my child.
18. ___ The teacher complains too much about my child.

Unhelpful Thoughts about Who Needs to Change

19. ___ My child is the one who needs to change. All of us would be better off if my child would change.
20. ___ I am the one who needs to change. My family would be better off if I would change.
21. ___ My spouse/partner needs to change. We would all be better off if he/she would change.
22. ___ The teacher needs to change. We would be better off if he/she would change.
23. ___ Medications are the answer. Medications will change my child.

For each thought you rated a 3, 4, or 5, ask yourself the following questions:

- * 1. ___ What is unhelpful about this thought?
2. ___ How would this thought influence my behavior toward my child?
3. ___ How would my behavior, which relates to my thoughts, affect my child?

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HELPFUL "COUNTER" THOUGHTS FOR PARENTS

Listed below are "counter" thoughts that parents can think instead of unhelpful thoughts. Unhelpful Thought #1 corresponds to Helpful Thought #1 and so on. Compare the unhelpful thoughts to the helpful thoughts.

Helpful Thoughts about the Child

1. My child behaves positively too.
2. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. What matters are solutions to the problems.
3. It is not just my child. I also play a role in the problem.
4. My child may be trying to get attention.
5. I'm being irrational. I have no proof that my child will continue to have problems. I need to wait for the future.
6. I can't just expect my child to behave. My child needs to be taught how to behave.
7. I need to accept my child. It's OK if my child is not great at school, sports, scouts, and so forth. I need to focus on my child's strengths.
8. It will be more helpful to focus on my child's strengths and not on weaknesses or "failures."

Helpful Thoughts about Self/Others

9. It is not just my fault; my child also plays a role in the problem.
10. It doesn't help to blame myself. I will focus on solutions to the problem.
11. It doesn't help to blame him/her (other parent). We need to work together.
12. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. I will focus on solutions to the problems.
13. It doesn't help to think about the family as being all messed up. Instead we need to take action.
- *14. My child is perhaps more challenging to parent than others, and therefore I will make mistakes. I need to accept the fact that I am going to make mistakes.
15. I have to parent my child. I have no choice. I need to think of new ways to parent my child.
16. My belief that I have no control over my child might be contributing to the problem. Many things are in my control. I need to figure out what I can do to parent my child.
17. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. We need to collaborate and work with the teacher.
18. It doesn't help to blame the teacher. My child can be a handful who would challenge any teacher. We need to work together with the teacher.

Helpful Thoughts about Who Needs to Change

19. It's unhelpful to think of my child as the only one needing to change. We all need to change.
20. It's unhelpful to think only of myself as needing to change. We all need to change.
21. It's unhelpful to think of my spouse/partner as being the only one who needs to change. We all need to change.
22. It's unhelpful to think only the teacher needs to change. We all need to work together.
23. Medications may help, but will not solve all the problems. We will also need to work hard to cope with the problems.

Ask yourself the following questions about these helpful thoughts:

1. What is helpful about this thought?
2. How would this thought influence my behavior toward my child?
3. How would my behavior, which relates to my thought, affect my child?

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