

STRESSED OUT?

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Are you stressed out? If you answered yes, you're not alone. A recent study by the American Institute of Stress found that 77% of people in the United States regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress and 73% regularly experience psychological symptoms caused by stress. Beyond that, 33% feel they are living with "extreme stress" and 48% say they lie awake at night due to stress.

We parents deal with a variety of stressors: managing schedules, balancing work and home, dealing with difficult behavior, etc. But stress, by definition, is not always negative. My son's seventh birthday party was a very positive experience. However, planning for and entertaining nine first-grade boys was not entirely without stress. Although stress can be caused by positive events and can at times be very useful (it's what gets you to work or school on time and helps you be an alert driver), it can have very negative effects if not managed properly. Stress management is especially important for parents, since the way we deal with stress inevitably affects our children. Let's consider a few key points about stress management.

INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL STRESS

Many of the stressors we experience are external—difficult relationships, physical illness, approaching deadlines, etc. However, the majority of our stress is actually internal. The sound of your crying infant might be stressful, but it's what goes through your head that creates most of the stress: "What if my baby is in pain?" "I must be a horrible parent if I can't get my baby to stop crying." "I'm never going to get a decent night's sleep again." Our thoughts about a stressful experience often cause more stress than the experience itself. In order to effectively manage stress, it is important to deal with both external and internal stressors.

COPING WITH STRESS

I think about coping with stress as a three-step process:

(1) Regain control: At the most basic level, stress is a physical response—your heart rate goes up, you breathe

faster, and your adrenaline starts pumping. One of the first coping skills to use when you recognize you are stressed is physical as well: BREATHE. When you take deep breaths that fill your diaphragm (stomach breaths, not chest breaths), you slow down the stress reaction. Another coping strategy is muscle relaxation. We hold stress in our muscles. If you can release the stress by relaxing the muscle (massage your temples, unclench your jaw), you again slow down the physical response and decrease the negative effect stress has on your body.

(2) Identify your stressors: Sometimes the stress of being a parent is so overwhelming that we don't even know where to start to look for solutions. The best place to start is to make something called a stress map. This is basically a written visual of all the areas of stress you encounter and what is stressful about each area. Here is a sample:

MONEY

In this example, the stressor is in the middle and the content of the stress is listed on each side. The list on the left is an example of external stressors. On the right are examples of the corresponding internal stressors—the worries in our heads. Once you've identified the stressors, you can move on to the next step.

(3) Remove stressors: Look at the external stressors, and brainstorm possible solutions to the identified problems. One of the stressful areas I identified in my own life was my morning routine, especially during the school year. I don't like to be late, so some mornings you could find me running around the house frantically yelling out orders. This often resulted in a cranky mom and cranky children. And it is not an ideal way to start the morning. Once I identified the obvious stressor, I was able to identify some

solutions. Now I make a point to do everything possible the night before—set out clothes, make lunches, pack bags, even put the coffee in the filter. (And okay, I guess I can get up a little earlier.) Mornings are much calmer

when I put those solutions in place.

If you look at your stress map and can't see any solutions to your stressors, show it to your spouse or to a friend. Often someone else can think of solutions you would not have considered. Many times I have handed my stressors over to other moms on the Internet by typing the stressor in Facebook or Google: "How do you get a baby to sleep through the night?" "What are some of your school lunch ideas?" "What are some of your best money-saving tips?"

Besides finding solutions to external stressors, we also need to deal with those pesky internal stressors. When you have identified the *thoughts* that stress you out, you can begin either to remove them or change them. This is easier said than done, but it can be very freeing. The following are some great visual ideas for removing stressful thoughts: Picture your mind as a car going through a car wash, washing away all the worries and concerns. Visualize yourself writing all your stressful thoughts on a chalkboard and using a giant eraser to erase them. One visual I have used is to picture my problem as a single word, tie a balloon around it, and send it up to God.

Another technique you can use is to change your thoughts. This involves reconstructing the stressful thought into a more encouraging one. For example, rather than focusing on what you aren't doing as a parent, focus on what you are doing. I'm not much of an artist or a cook, so looking at the multitude of Pinterest meals and crafts I am *not* making for my children can leave me feeling pretty depleted. When those negative thoughts start, I instead focus

on the fact that I am teaching my kids about Jesus and doing my best to love their father. Both are very positive things I am doing for them.

We've talked about ways to cope with specific stressors, but there are

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also ways to manage and even prevent stress in general.

Take care of your body: Be aware of what you are eating, and get enough sleep and exercise.

Relax: Get a massage (one of the most effective ways to counteract stress). Get involved in a hobby (that doesn't stress you out). Listen to relaxing music.

Break it down: Break overwhelming tasks into smaller pieces. Need to clean your house? Start with the sock drawer.

Laugh: Watch a favorite comedian. Crack up about the silly things your kids say.

Build a support group: Get together with friends on a regular basis. Join a small group Bible study.

People-serve, don't people-please: If you are on a committee or involved in an activity just because you think you should be or because you think it makes you look good, stop doing it. Put your efforts into what you enjoy and are good at. And remember, you don't have to use all of your gifts all of the time.

Finally, remember this: Stressful times in life are opportunities to see God's power. He assures us not only that he will get us through difficulties but that he can use them to focus our eyes on his promises, where we receive strength. The next time you feel the stress of being a parent, take a deep breath and give yourself this powerful reminder: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

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