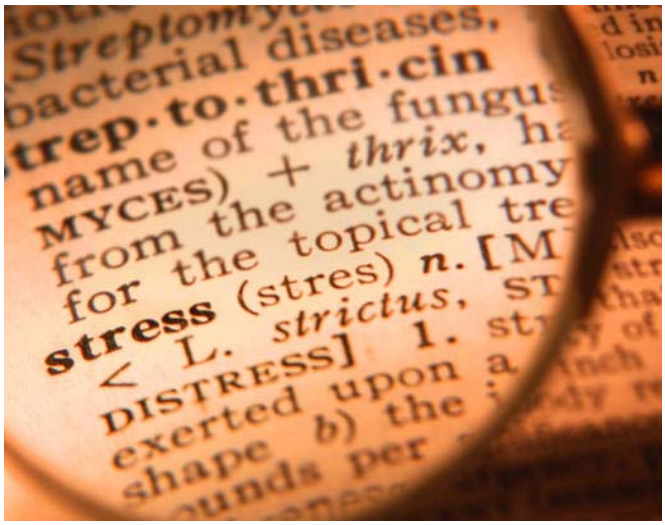
Stressed Out!

Stressed Out! It's a phrase we all know because we have all experienced the feelings associated with stress. However, for foster parents and relative caregivers, the stress in parenting someone with special needs, history of trauma, attachment issues, emotional and behavioral concerns, or history of multiple placements adds a whole new level to stress.

We all have different thresholds for stress. Some of us thrive on the excitement of having a high level of stress on a daily basis, while some of us find stress to be exhausting and something to be avoided at all costs. For whatever reason, if you find yourself too overcome by the stress in your life, here's some information that might help.

System Overload

Stress actually comes from having one or more problems at the same time. It's those feelings of being worried, anxious, scared, overwhelmed, and angry all at the same time. Some people say they know that they're stressed when they get a headache or have trouble sleeping, while others can feel trapped and angry. So what does stress do to our bodies?



- Your pupils dilate so you can see better.
- You breathe more rapidly from the upper part of your chest.
- Your heart rate increases because your heart is working harder.
- Your body releases stress hormones called adrenaline and cortisol, which give your more strength, energy, speed, and endurance.
- Your digestive system shuts down and you lose your appetite or get a dry mouth.
- You start to sweat and your hands and feet get cold and clammy.
- Your face gets flushed.

Fight or Flight

When you're stressed, your body kicks itself into high gear and goes into "fight or flight" mode. Back in the days of early history, stress actually helped people survive because problems usually meant life or death situations.

Nowadays, stress is that flood of emotions that you get, usually in the form of a natural rush of stress hormones. Some of us find ourselves having a "fight" reaction by either getting angry or possibly becoming physical and fighting from the stress hormones. The other half of us have the opposite "flight" reaction and try to avoid the problem by escaping

Stressed Decision Making

Most of the decisions you make when you're overly stressed probably aren't the best choices you can make. That's because your body is doing its best to alleviate the stress, even if that means

Continued on page 2

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making quick and poor decisions. The choices we make when we're overwhelmed are usually impulsive, popular, or the easiest (at the time!) solution. But as we all know, these decisions often make things worse in the end.

One Wisconsin parent says, "I'm forever telling my daughter 'Uh-oh! Today Sierra is making life difficult for Tomorrow Sierra again,' but I forget that I do the same thing."

> *Stress is not what happens to us. It's our response to what happens. And **RESPONSE** is something we can choose.*
>
> —Maureen Killoran

What's Stressing You Out?

It could be something big like your finances or a relationship issue. Parents have multiple issues going on at the time, which is probably making you feel even more stressed out. So how do you know exactly what's causing the stress?

Sometimes you already know, while other times you might need to calm yourself down enough to actually figure it out. If so, try to talk to someone you trust, write in your journal, exercise, or even just sit and breathe.

Here's a list of various things in no particular order that people find stressful in their daily lives.

- Relationships with family and friends
- Themselves
- Employment and employment changes
- Arguments
- Finances
- Gaining a new family member
- Death of spouse, child, family member, or a close family friend
- Changes in the health or behavior of a family member, including drug and alcohol problems
- Divorce or separation
- Changes in your living situation, like moving or remodeling
- Neighborhood or world problems
- Guilt

So What Can You Do?

Ironically, when we're stressed, most of us choos something that helps us the least with the stress. That's a normal reaction, but becoming more aware of it may help you make better choices. Next time you need some better options, take a look at this list of stress management skills.

Take Care of Your Body

- *Eat healthier.* Instead of going for comfort foods high in sugar, salt, caffeine or alcohol, get a cold glass of water and grab a piece of fruit.
- *Sleep more.* Many of us are busier than ever and do not get enough sleep. The average adult still needs seven to eight hours of sleep, in spite of the number of things on the parent "to do" list.
- *Get active.* Find *something* physical you like to do. Sometimes the easiest and most helpful thing is just to go for a walk. Getting physical helps your body release endorphins, which naturally make you feel better.

Mind Your Mind

Be assertive and communicate more effectively. Assertiveness is a kind of confidence and lets others know what you want in an honest and respectful way. When you're assertive, you tend to feel better about your relationships, more in control and more relaxed.

Continued on page 3

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Make an action plan and set some short and long term goals. An easy way to do this is to think of a goal, then think of the steps you need to take to get there, who will help you, and a date when you want to complete your goal.

Are you short on time? If so, some time management skills might help you out. You can use a calendar, set priorities, and make "to do" lists. Find out what your biggest time wasters are and then limit the time you spend on those activities.

Decision making is something that sounds so easy, but can be really hard when you're stressed. Think of three choices then talk to someone or write them down. It also helps to think about possible consequences ahead of time.

Feelings Matter

Being positive and finding humor are two things that really help when you're stressed. Think of five things that you're thankful for and then write them down.

What's funny to you? Find an activity that makes you laugh. Is it a video on *YouTube* or watching your favorite movie?

When you're in a rut, try something new. Maybe you're scared of failing at something or consider yourself a perfectionist. Learn how to forgive yourself and have small expectations when you try something new.

Relax and Reach Out

Ever just need a break? Sometimes a relaxing activity can really help. Find something that you love to do that also relaxes you like:

- Listening to music
- Playing sports
- Fixing your house

Stress can come from just about anywhere, including being overwhelmed, frustrated, angry, and yes, even anxiousness. What is stressful to one person may not be stressful to someone else.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is a feeling of fear. You may not even know why you're afraid. It's possible that you have an anxiety disorder, and not just everyday stress. Anxiety disorders include general anxieties, specific fears, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and other fears.

Stress tends to be situational, whereas anxieties tend to be persistent. If you think you may have an anxiety disorder, talk to your doctor or a therapist.

- Restoring a car
- Making crafts
- Singing, dancing and/or acting
- Doing Yoga and other relaxation exercises
- Making art
- Baking or cooking
- Watching a movie
- Scrapbooking
- Sewing
- Journaling
- Getting active: walking, swimming, biking, joining a gym, etc.
- Taking a bath or a nap
- Talking to your friends
- Praying or meditating
- Hiking, camping, fishing and/or hunting

Find your calm center by thinking of some place or activity where you'd really like to be

Continued on page 3

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and then imagine yourself there. Focus on your breathing and take three long, deep breaths.

Just need someone to talk to? You're not alone—many of us need help from our support system when we're stressed.

Personal Beliefs

When Sometimes in the midst of stress, our own guiding center of beliefs becomes lost in the mix and loses the priority that it once had. If you find that your beliefs play an important role in your life, take time to reprioritize them. You need that sense of comfort.

Create a Self Care Action Plan

It's normal for most foster parents to get stressed out, but if you notice that your stress isn't going away or increases, create a self care action plan.

Things like caring for yourself and putting yourself back on the top of the "to do" list can really help. Self care for you and your family includes respite, asking for help and support, and/or seeing a mental health or medical professional.

If you know that there's something really tough going on in your life and feel like you need help, don't wait until it gets worse, ask for the help and support you need now. To read more about self care, please read our tip sheet http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/310/SelfCare2.pdf

Tomorrow is a New Day

Whether the stress in your life was just from a busy, hectic day or whether the stress has been ongoing and long term, we all know that tomorrow is a new day.

Sometimes just knowing that there are things you can do and people to help support can provide a sense of comfort. Also try to find what works best to alleviate stress for yourself and change your perspective when possible. Who knows, in 20 years you may be laughing at something that found to be an extremely stressful experience or event yesterday.

Resources from the FCARC Library

http://wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/

For Caregivers:

- ***Stress Management for People Who Can't, Won't Stop Caring*** by Maris Blechner-Tape
- ***Stress in the Foster Family*** by MTI Videos-VHS
- ***Exclusive Q & A: Answering the Most Difficult Questions Parents Have Who are Raising the Most Challenging Children*** by Heather Forbes-CD
- **Trauma Through a Child's Eyes: Awakening the Ordinary Miracle of Healing** by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline

For Youth:

- ***After A Loss*** by Bill Streele
- ***Hot Stones & Funny Bones: Teens Helping Teens Cope with Stress and Anger*** by Brain Seaward with Linda Bartlett
- ***Chill and Spill*** by Lorig and Jacobs
- ***Words Will Never Hurt Me*** by Sally Ogden
- ***Fighting Invisible Tigers: Stress Management for Teens*** by Earl Hipp

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