

Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

Vol 7 No 6 December 2004

Stress Management for Carers of Young Children

Introduction

Caring for young children is a rewarding and enjoyable career, yet at the same time, the associated stress and demands of the role can cause serious health impacts. In order to fulfil the roles of the job, carers need to know how to look after themselves by managing their stress and learning to restore a sense of balance in life. Working with young children can be physically, emotionally and intellectually draining.

However, human beings cannot live effectively without stress of some kind. Too much stress can be harmful (the overload zone) and too little stress can be detrimental (the underload zone). Just as our perception of stress varies from individual to individual, so too does the level of stress we need to function effectively – this is generally referred to as the optimal stress zone. Carers can discover how to reach their optimal stress zone by learning about the causes of stress and how to manage these.

Stressors cause stress. Carers frequently identify a range of contributors to their levels of stress (or stressors). These include:

- work overload
- physical and emotional demands
- low income levels
- financial pressures
- high turnover of staff/carers
- time constraints
- “paperwork”
- lack of time and support
- inflexible routines
- working with “stressed” children all day
- challenges of meeting the expectations of all families
- limited resources
- feeling unsupported
- poor communication
- the challenges of their own children and household
- insufficient recreation time
- challenges of worklife and family commitments
- too many commitments and
- wider global issues (war, terrorism threats, injustices, violence in the community)

These stress factors need to be addressed before they become a threat to our commitment to the quality care and education of young children.



When carers are suffering from stress, they may become insensitive to children, parents and the job. Sometimes carers may feel they are just “going through the motions” and at times, carelessness, mistakes and poor performance take their toll.

In our fast-paced society, we can rarely change or eliminate our stressors but we can work towards changes in how we respond.

Before launching into a stress management plan or stress reduction strategies, it is worthwhile for carers to reflect on what they want in their lives (both personal and work), rather than focus on what they don't want. Northrup (1998) calls this “following your life's purpose”. Many carers would agree that they aspire to enjoying their work each day, feeling a sense of satisfaction. This involves effectively facing challenges, communicating positively and developing respectful relationships with the children and adults around them and experiencing energy, enthusiasm and optimism for the future.

Unless we can learn to recognise the causes of stress in our lives and identify the symptoms of stress before they become debilitating, we will be left feeling depleted, anxious and unwell on a regular basis. Putting positive stress management strategies in place before symptoms become too severe will help carers achieve their goals and aspirations.

Some common symptoms of stress include headaches, dizziness, high blood pressure, muscle tension (especially in the jaw and neck), rashes, poor immunity, heart palpitations, indigestion, breathing difficulties, loss of appetite and insomnia. This list is not exhaustive and these signs can also indicate symptoms of illness other than stress. The best way of determining whether stress symptoms are serious, is to have a check up with your doctor. Similarly, carers identify a range of feelings and behaviours that they experience when stressed, such as anger, crying, yelling, feeling upset, disillusionment, loneliness, hopelessness, ‘out of control’, accident prone, depression, ‘stretched in all directions’, numbness, poor judgement, inability to sleep.

We often have unrealistically high expectations of ourselves and add to our feelings of stress by engaging in negative mind-talk like

“What's wrong with me?”

“I never do anything right”.

“I'm hopeless”.

When we are busy and overwhelmed, we may come to see our stress reactions as “normal” and we resolve to “put up with” these responses. This can result in a diminished capacity to give to and nurture young children.

Learning how to relax, stay calm and having a range of

simple and effective techniques to draw upon will increase carers' abilities to cope and thus lessen stress. It is unrealistic to expect that stress can be eliminated totally.

Techniques for managing stress involve learning:

- To recognise the problem
- To choose stress management strategies that fit in with individuals' lifestyles and
- The hardest part...TO DO IT ie manage the stress on a regular basis!

Carers may choose from the following stress management suggestions to enable them to care for themselves and gain a sense of control over their lives:

- **Good Nutrition:**

Learning to recognise foods that are good for us is an important step in helping the body combat the toll that stress can take. Consult a doctor or dietician or simply refer to some books on good nutrition to put good eating habits into place

- **Breathing techniques:**

These are the most readily accessible resource we have for creating and sustaining our vital energy. Breathing practice can help ward off disease by increasing the immune system's functioning and by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels. *For a quick reviver, try inhaling for five counts and then exhaling for five counts in a sitting or standing position. Repeat this breathing exercise a few times.*

- **Regular exercise:**

Exercise such as walking, swimming, Yoga, Tai Chi (Qi Gong), gardening practised for at least twenty minutes, three times a week relaxes our bodies and our minds. Exercise helps burn off ‘stress chemicals’ that can accumulate in our bodies.

- **Hydrate:**

Drinking about two litres of clean, purified water a day assists in maintaining calm feelings as well as preventing health problems such as constipation, headache and hypertension.

- **Care for your body:**

Uphold occupational, health and safety guidelines by observing safe work practices (e.g. when lifting large or heavy objects).

- **Take short breaks:**

Breathe deeply, stretch, revive and replenish during the day. *Stretching, a simple Qi Gong movement or a short walk will energise the body and lift the spirit.*

- **Relaxation Techniques:**

Learning to relax is a simple and effective way to bring peace and contentment. Some examples of these are progressive muscle relaxation, tense/release relaxation, relaxation using the breath, visualisation and yoga nidra. When practised regularly, these

techniques can provide a sense of calm, rest and rejuvenation in carers' lives.

- **Meditation, prayer or reflection:**

These techniques can develop insight and connection to our intuition and inner world. Many people who follow a faith already take time out to pray and reflect. This practice helps them to cope with the challenges of life. People do not need to follow a religion to experience the benefits of meditation and reflection.

- **Interests and hobbies:**

Learning to put the job into perspective by adding diversity and interest to life is a useful technique. Establish or resume interests like music, drawing, painting, seeing movies, craft, sewing, reading and so on. *These will add richness and interest to life and provide distraction from the day to day gloom that stress can bring.*

- **Think positively:**

We can choose our attitude to life by standing for hope. Reserving the right to be optimistic and thinking creatively about solutions to problems is known as 'learned optimism'. This helps us to change negative mindsets such as procrastination, perfectionism, criticism, cynicism, playing the victim, being a 'doormat', labelling and denial. Learning how to use affirmations e.g. "I am now calm and relaxed"; "I am organised and efficient at work", to achieve desired results in life can be a powerful tool.

- **Pamper yourself:**

Self-pampering and nurturing is part of transforming stress and bringing joy into life. Explore ways to de-stress during the day (e.g. play relaxing music at work, take a brief walk in the garden) or at the end of the day (e.g. a warm bath with fragrant oils and candles or a visit to a massage therapist after a busy day).

- **Create a calm work environment:**

Look around your work environment and replace stressful elements such as mess, disorganisation, too much visual 'clutter' and systems that no longer work for you. Organised, tidy and stress free work areas help carers achieve goals and attend to the tasks at hand with energy.

- **Develop relaxation techniques with children:**

It may be time to replace some age-old work habits and routines with more workable ones. For example, persisting with "sleep time" for some children can often cause more problems than benefits. Replacing this with "rest time" featuring relaxation and visualisation techniques can be calming and rejuvenating for children and adults. Incorporate a "relaxation session" using gentle exercise and relaxation for a period of about twenty minutes per



day. Additionally, enjoy short energy breaks by doing some simple stretching and breathing exercises or simple Qi Gong movements before a transition time. Provide spaces where children can 'simply be' (Thomas and Shepherd, 2000) such as a relaxation mat outside where children can play with soft toys, aesthetic fabrics and listen to relaxing stories.

- **Communicate:**

Feelings of stress often arise when we fail to state our needs directly and assertively. If you require uninterrupted time during the day or evening for important tasks, you need to tell those around you. Try to negotiate a balance at work so that everyone's needs are acknowledged.

- **Make time and technology work for you:**

Stress is often caused when we "manage by crisis". Relaxed people plan their days so they are not burdened with inflexible deadlines and relentless schedules. We are often bombarded with technological overload. Make your telephone work for you by using voicemail. Don't allow technology to make you accessible to everyone, all the time. *Use technology to protect your time and space while allowing people to leave you messages as needed.*

- **Stay motivated:**

Develop a stress management plan with a friend or colleague. Check on each others' progress regularly. Include activities that you can share together such as an exercise class, a morning walk, a swim after work or a visit to a beauty, aromatherapy or massage therapist together. In this way you'll both be achieving your stress management goals and keeping the other committed and 'on track'. Adopting a positive and preventative approach to stress management involves incorporating the above suggestions into daily life. This helps to develop the skills and understandings to deal with stressful situations when they arise. By developing positive habits and practising relaxation strategies, carers are simultaneously modelling techniques for children and looking after themselves.

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- The article is relevant for all of the Quality Areas and Principles in QIAS and FDCQA.*

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Babies and Massage in Children's Services

Families and caregivers spontaneously nurture infants through touch. All caregivers cuddle babies as natural nurturing behaviour. Carers pat or stroke babies when they are going to sleep or give them a cuddle, a rub on the back or a gentle stroke on the face if a baby is upset. There is an increasing awareness that massage can provide an enhancement to the child's program as carers acknowledge a baby's need for touch throughout the day. This includes touch involving skin to skin contact. Caregivers need to be aware of the baby's response as not all children respond in the same way with some babies more resistant. Some may prefer to be touched on some areas but show dislike of others and this must be respected. For a baby experiencing stress it can be calming and assist them to relax. It helps to establish closeness in the relationships between caregivers and babies.

Opportunities for massage include:

- when changing nappies
- at sleep time
- spontaneously when babies are being cuddled
- when sitting beside a baby on the mat on the floor
- when an infant approaches a caregiver.

Some babies enjoy having their feet rubbed, hands massaged or cheeks stroked. Others may prefer a rub on the stomach or firm pats on the back. It is not necessary to put anything on baby's skin prior to a massage although the use of a pure baby oil, lotion or powder is used by some carers to help facilitate massage by reducing friction.

Carers can include it as an important part of their interactions with babies everyday.

Reference:

Infant Massage, Something Natural.
Child Care Focus (Volume32, Winter 94) Manitoba Child Care Association



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EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM

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