

# Stress Management in Families Dealing with a Mental Illness

## DEFINING STRESS

---

“Stress” describes a feeling of pressure, strain, or tension. People often say they are “under stress” or feel “stressed out” when they are dealing with challenging situations or events. In this handout, we will talk about how you can cope more effectively with stress as the relative of someone with a mental illness.

People with psychosis, serious mental illnesses, or other mental health concerns are often stressed. Furthermore, having a relative with a mental illness can cause high levels of stress, and this stress can have a negative impact on you and your relative. People with a mental illness seem to have better outcomes if they and their families find positive ways to manage stress.

Here are a few important points about stress:

- Everyone encounters stressful situations.
- Sometimes the stress comes from something positive (like a new job, new apartment, or new relationship) and sometimes from something negative (like boredom, having an argument with someone, or being the victim of crime).
- In people with a mental illness, stress may worsen mental illness or trigger a relapse.
- You can develop strategies to help you better cope with stressful situations.
- As a family member of someone with a mental illness, you may be able to help that person deal with stress more effectively.

*One in 5 people report some problem with stress.*

## CAUSES OF STRESS FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS

---

It is important to remember that different people find different things stressful.

For example, some people enjoy going to a party and meeting new people, while the same experience makes others nervous. Some people love their jobs, while others find their jobs stressful. Anticipating sources of stress can help you cope better.

There are two main sources of stress: significant life events and daily hassles.

Significant life events can be good or bad. They include moving, getting married, mourning the death of a loved one, and having a baby. Some life events are more stressful than others. For example, getting a divorce is usually more stressful than changing jobs. And even positive life events (like having a baby or getting a new job) can be stressful. The **Life Events Checklist** on Page 2 will help you identify stressful life events that you have experienced in the past year.

Daily hassles are the small, ordinary stresses of everyday life that can add up and take a toll over time. They also contribute to the stress people experience. The **Daily Hassles Checklist** on Page 2 will help you identify smaller stressors from the past week.

## LIFE EVENTS CHECKLIST

Put a check mark next to each event that you have experienced in the past year.

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving                | <input type="checkbox"/> Inheriting or winning money                | <input type="checkbox"/> Going on a diet                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting married       | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial problems                         | <input type="checkbox"/> New responsibilities at work     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New baby              | <input type="checkbox"/> Injury or illness of a loved one           | <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Divorce or separation | <input type="checkbox"/> Death of a loved one                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitalization                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Injury                | <input type="checkbox"/> Being the victim of a crime                | <input type="checkbox"/> Stopped smoking                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Illness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal problems                             | <input type="checkbox"/> New responsibilities at home     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New job               | <input type="checkbox"/> New boyfriend or girlfriend                | <input type="checkbox"/> Problematic drinking or drug use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of a job         | <input type="checkbox"/> Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                     |

\_\_\_ Total number of life events you checked off

*Moderate stress = 1 event | High stress = 2–3 events | Very high stress = 4 or more events*

## DAILY HASSLES CHECKLIST

Put a check mark next to each event that you have experienced in the past week.

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not having enough money for necessities     | <input type="checkbox"/> Arguments at home   | <input type="checkbox"/> Minor medical problems               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not having enough money to spend on leisure | <input type="checkbox"/> Arguments at work   | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of order or cleanliness at home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crowded living situation                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Encounters with unpleasant people (sales clerks, restaurant servers, transit clerks, toll booth collectors) | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of order or cleanliness at work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crowded public transportation               | <input type="checkbox"/> Noisy environment at home   | <input type="checkbox"/> Unpleasant chores at home            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Long drives or traffic back-ups             | <input type="checkbox"/> Noisy environment at work   | <input type="checkbox"/> Unpleasant tasks at work             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling rushed at home                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough privacy at home  | <input type="checkbox"/> Living in a dangerous neighborhood   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling rushed at work                      |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                         |

\_\_\_ Total number of daily hassles you checked off

*Moderate stress = 1–2 daily hassles | High stress = 3–6 daily hassles | Very high stress = 7 or more daily hassles*

## ASK YOURSELF ...

- What is the most stressful life event you have experienced in the past year?
- What are the most stressful daily hassles you have experienced in the past week?

## RECOGNIZING STRESS

---

Stress can affect your physical health as well as your emotions, thoughts, behavior, and mood. Recognizing your personal signs of stress can help you do something about it.

Use the following checklist to identify your personal signs of stress.

## SIGNS OF STRESS CHECKLIST

---

Place a check mark next to each sign of stress that you have experienced in the past week:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Trembling or shaking               | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sweating                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Digestion problems                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling restless or “keyed up”         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased heart rate      | <input type="checkbox"/> Stomachaches                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Tearfulness                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Back pain                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Dry mouth                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change in appetite        | <input type="checkbox"/> Problems concentrating             | <input type="checkbox"/> Being prone to accidents               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty falling asleep | <input type="checkbox"/> Anger over relatively minor things | <input type="checkbox"/> Using alcohol or drugs (or wanting to) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased need for sleep  | <input type="checkbox"/> Irritability                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                           |

*Being aware of signs of stress can help you take steps to prevent stress from getting worse.*

## ASK YOURSELF ...

Have you noticed any signs of stress over the last week? What do you do when you notice you are under stress?

Stress can make people feel irritable and lead to conflict or arguments, especially in families. Unfortunately, family conflict can make mental health symptoms worse. Learning to deal well with stress is one way to reduce tension and improve quality of life in your family.

*Improving stress management is critical for **all** family members.*

## TIPS FOR PREVENTING OR COPING WITH STRESS

---

- Recognizing stressful situations is the first step to preventing and coping with stress.
- By avoiding some stressful situations, you can devote more time to enjoying yourself and achieving your goals.
- If you can't avoid stressful situations, you can get better at dealing with the stress they cause.
- Most people find it helpful to be familiar with a variety of stress management strategies.
- Too much stress can contribute to family conflict.

Use the following table to review strategies for dealing with stress. Mark whether you already use a strategy or would like to try it.

Strategy	Application	I already use	I would like to try
Recognize situations that caused stress in the past.	Think of ways to handle stressful situations. If large holidays with your family make you feel tense, try taking short breaks from the larger group.		
Schedule meaningful activities.	Identify activities that reduce stress. For some people, work is meaningful and enjoyable, while others turn to volunteering, hobbies, music, or sports.		
Schedule time for relaxation.	Take time to relax each day — to refresh your mind and body after the day's tensions.		
Find balance in your daily life.	Evaluate your activities and determine whether too much activity is causing stress. Be sure to leave time for sleep and for restful, relaxing activities.		
Develop your support system.	Seek out people who are encouraging and supportive, rather than critical and pressuring.		
Take care of your health.	Make sure you are eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and avoiding alcohol or drug misuse.		
Talk about your feelings.	Tell a friend or a family member about positive and negative feelings.		
Write down your feelings in a journal.	Keep a journal to record positive and negative feelings and to avoid bottling them up.		
Avoid being hard on yourself and identify positive features about yourself.	Create reasonable expectations for yourself. Give yourself credit for your talents and strengths and remind yourself of these things when you are feeling stressed.		
Use relaxation or mindfulness techniques.	Make a plan to use a relaxation technique, such as relaxed breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or imagining a peaceful scene. Make a plan to use a mindfulness technique such as paying careful attention to each item in your surroundings. Additional relaxation techniques can be found in the following section.		
Use positive self-talk.	Develop a short phrase to say to yourself when you feel stressed, such as, "This is hard, but I can do it," or, "If I take this one step at a time, I'll be able to handle it."		
Maintain your sense of humor.	It is hard to feel stressed when you are laughing. Make a list of things that make you laugh and seek out those things when you feel stressed.		
Participate in religious or other spiritual activities.	Make a plan to participate regularly in a religious or spiritual activity.		
Exercise.	Work off your stress by making a plan to exercise regularly.		
Listen to music.	Put together a playlist of your favorite songs to listen to when you are feeling stressed.		
Create or go to see artwork.	Make a plan to fit art into your weekly routine. Read an art book or draw pictures.		
Participate in a hobby.	Find a hobby you enjoy. Make a plan to try it out with a friend.		
Other:			

***Reducing stress in the family can help your relative with mental illness avoid worsening symptoms or a relapse — and help you all live more satisfying lives.***

## ASK YOURSELF ...

Which strategies for reducing stress are you most interested in trying?

## RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

---

Relaxation techniques can be very helpful in coping with stress. They are most effective when practiced regularly. When first learning a technique, you may find yourself concentrating on doing the steps according to the instructions. As you become familiar with the instructions, you will be able to concentrate more on the relaxation you are experiencing.

Three types of relaxation techniques are described below: relaxed breathing, muscle relaxation, and imagining a peaceful scene. Choose one of these techniques and try practicing it daily. After a week, evaluate whether you think the technique is effective for you.

## RELAXED BREATHING

---

The goal of this exercise is to slow down your breathing, especially your exhaling. Here's how to do it:

1. Choose a word that you associate with relaxation, such as calm, relax, or peaceful.
2. Inhale through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Take normal breaths, not deep ones.
3. While you exhale, say the relaxing word you have chosen. Say it very slowly, like this: "caaaaaalm" or "reeelaaax."
4. Pause after exhaling before taking your next breath. If it's not too distracting, count to four before inhaling each new breath.
5. Repeat the entire sequence 10 to 15 times.

## MUSCLE RELAXATION

---

The goal of this technique is to gently stretch your muscles to reduce stiffness and tension. These exercises start at your head and work down to your feet, and you can do them while sitting in a chair. Here's how:

- **Shoulder shrugs.** Lift both shoulders in a shrugging motion. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Let your shoulders drop down after each shrug. Repeat three to five times.
- **Overhead arm stretches.\*** Raise both arms straight above your head. Interlace your fingers, like you're making a basket, with your palms facing down (toward the floor). Stretch your arms toward the ceiling. Then, keeping your fingers interlaced, rotate your palms to face upward (toward the ceiling). Stretch toward the ceiling again. Repeat three to five times.
- **Stomach tension.** Pull your stomach muscles toward your back, making them as tight as you can tolerate. Feel the tension and hold onto it for 10 seconds. Then let go of the muscles and let your stomach relax, bit by bit. Focus on the release from the tension. Notice the heavy yet comfortable sensation in your stomach.
- **Knee raises.** Reach down and grab your right knee with one or both hands. Pull your knee up toward your chest (as close to your chest as is comfortable). Hold your knee there for a few seconds before returning your foot to the floor. Reach down and grab your left knee with one or both hands and bring it up toward your chest. Hold it there for a few seconds. Repeat the sequence three to five times.
- **Foot and ankle rolls.** Lift your feet and stretch your legs out. Rotate your ankles and feet, three to five times in one direction and then three to five times in the other direction.

\* If this is not comfortable to do with your arms overhead, try it with your arms extended in front of you.

# IMAGINING A PEACEFUL SCENE

---

The goal of this technique is to mentally take yourself away from stress and picture yourself in a more relaxed, calm situation. Here are the steps:

1. Choose a scene that you find peaceful, calm, and restful. If you have trouble thinking of a scene, consider the following possibilities:
  - At the beach
  - On a walk in the woods
  - On a park bench
  - On a mountain path
  - In a canoe or sailboat
  - In a meadow
  - On a train
  - In a cabin
  - Beside a river
  - Next to a waterfall
  - In a tall apartment building, overlooking a large city
  - Riding a bicycle
  - On a farm
2. After choosing a peaceful scene, imagine as many details as possible, using all your senses, in steps 3 through 6.
3. What does the scene look like? What are the colors? Is it light or dark? What shapes are in the scene? If it's a nature scene, what kinds of trees or flowers do you see? What animals? If it's a city scene, what kind of buildings? What kind of vehicles?
4. What sounds are in your peaceful scene? Can you hear water or the sounds of waves? Are there sounds from animals or birds? From the breeze? From people?
5. What could you feel with your sense of touch? Are there textures? Is it cool or warm? Can you feel a breeze?
6. What smells are there in your peaceful scene? Could you smell flowers? The smell of the ocean? The smell of food cooking?
7. Choose to disregard any stressful thoughts if they arise and turn your attention back to the peaceful scene, resuming the focus on all of the details you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste.
8. Allow at least five minutes for this relaxation technique.

# DEVELOPING A PLAN TO COPE WITH STRESS

In this handout, you have identified stressful situations, signs of stress, strategies for preventing stress, and strategies for coping with stress. The following form can help you put this information together in a personalized plan for coping with stress.

## Personalized Plan for Coping With Stress

**Stressful situations to be aware of:**

1.

2.

3.

**Signs that you are under stress:**

1.

2.

3.

**Your strategies for preventing stress:**

1.

2.

3.

**Your strategies for coping with stress:**

1.

2.

3.

## SUMMARY

---

- “Stress” describes a feeling of pressure, strain, or tension.
- People with mental illness seem to do better if their relatives exhibit fewer signs of stress.
- One in 5 people report some problem with stress.
- Major life events and daily hassles are both sources of stress.
- Being aware of signs of stress can help you take steps to prevent it from getting worse.
- Preventing stress can help someone with mental illness avoid worsening symptoms or having a relapse.
- Coping more effectively with stress allows you to focus on goals and important aspects of your life.
- Regularly practicing relaxation techniques when you are calm helps you use them effectively when you are stressed.

