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# The Struggle to Juggle: Stress Management Strategies for **You and Your Family**

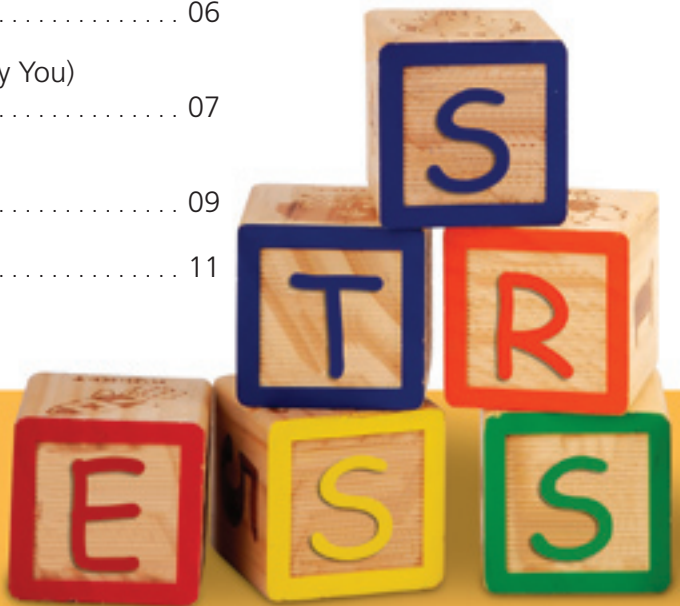


THE PSYCHOLOGY  
FOUNDATION  
OF CANADA

LA FONDATION  
DE PSYCHOLOGIE  
DU CANADA

# Table of Contents

The Nuts and Bolts of Stress . . . . .	01
What Causes You to Feel Stressed? . . . . .	03
Ten Strategies to Help You Manage Your Stress . . . .	04
Kids Have Stress Too! . . . . .	06
Helping Your Children (and Ultimately You) to Manage Stress . . . . .	07
Help Them Out: Stress Reduction Strategies for Children . . . . .	09
For Further Information . . . . .	11



## Stress It's For Everyone!

Just the mention of the word “stress” gets people’s attention pretty quickly. That’s because stress affects everyone – it is universal. Adults experience stress, children experience stress, and even your pet experiences stress! Stress cuts across every economic, social and cultural boundary, so learning to understand it and manage it is important for everyone. If stress is not managed properly, it can have serious negative health consequences – both physically and mentally.



*“ Stress is the single, non-specific reaction of the body to a demand made on it.”*

*– Dr. Hans Selye (1974)*

# The Nuts and Bolts of Stress

## But, what is stress, really?

There is an identifiable physiological stress response that occurs in the body when a person is excited, fearful, challenged, or anxious. When stress occurs, the brain signals the body to get ready to meet the challenge by stimulating the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is the control centre for many bodily functions including muscle tension, breathing, blood pressure, heart rate, pupil dilation and temperature control.

When the body or mind is challenged, a number of chemical and hormonal changes take place. These changes activate the body either to gear up to flee from danger, or to stand and fight it. This ‘flight or fight response’ was a healthy, necessary response to ensure our survival when most threats and challenges were physical in nature (e.g., prehistoric communities dealing with predators and hostile environments, etc.). Today, the threats and challenges we face are often social and emotional, rather than physical, but our bodies still react in much the same way as our ancestors’ did.

Two of the important hormones that are triggered by that stress response are adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline is a fast-acting hormone that prepares the body for quick response by releasing chemicals that give an energy surge, sending extra strength to the muscles of the arms and legs, and increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen content in the blood stream. Adrenaline acts quickly and its effects go away quickly.

Cortisol, which acts in conjunction with adrenaline to increase energy, is a longer-lasting stress hormone that allows the body to remain alert for minutes, hours, or even days. Cortisol levels remain elevated in the body longer, keeping it “on alert” until the stress passes. However, problems can occur when stress continues and cortisol levels remain elevated – the body and mind can experience exhaustion, including a suppressed immune system, increased muscle tension, and reduced concentration. In fact, research has shown that chronic elevated cortisol increases our sensitivity and reactions to stress and impairs our ability to calm down after a stressful experience.

**Ultimately, long-term stress can be dangerous.** Too much stress can bring on illnesses or increase the severity of them – like diabetes, colitis and heart disease, to name only a few – and can also contribute to behavioural problems like substance abuse or difficulty socializing. You can train yourself to recognize when you are under too much stress and take measures to reduce it,

*Did you know that stress can encourage weight gain? Because of the hormonal changes going on in your body when you are stressed, stress can trigger cravings for fat and carbohydrates. This craving is designed to let the body know that more energy is required to get you through the stressful, high-energy demand period. What are your eating habits when you are stressed?*

like disengaging yourself from the source of stress, for example, and then facing the problem at a later time when you are more calm and can problem-solve more clearly.

Bear in mind also that there is such a thing as ‘good stress’. A little bit of stress is enough to be energizing, motivating, performance enhancing, and helpful in the face of danger. We all need enough stress to stretch, grow and keep life interesting! **The key is to try and manage your stress levels so that stress does not become harmful for you or your family.**



# What Causes You to Feel Stressed?



## **Did you know?**

*... that a research project by the University of Rochester published in March 2007 in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine showed parents with more worries also had children who were sick more often? These findings are important because they suggest that impairment in parents' mood and behaviour may be an active mechanism in promoting negative effects on children's health.*

*"The more one worries, the older one gets; the more one laughs, the younger one feels."*

*– Chinese Proverb*

There are many sources of stress. Not only are they different for everyone, but they also depend on an individual's current situation. Yet, there seem to be some common causes of stress among Canadians. According to Desjardins Financial Security's *2008 Survey on Canadian Attitudes towards Physical and Mental Health*, which surveyed a representative sample of over 1,500 Canadian adults, 43% of Canadians point to **finances** as their top stressor, 17% say **family matters/problems** are, and 16% say meeting their children's needs is their biggest stressor.

In the same survey, a whopping 18% of Canadians say **work pressure** causes them the most stress. Fortunately, there are many strategies and additional resources that can help to reduce the stress in your life and ultimately improve your work-life balance. Some strategies and ideas are included in this brochure – strategies that can help you and your family. By managing your own stress more effectively, you can not only help improve your own mental and physical well-being, but you can also reduce the second-hand stress that your other family members may experience as a result of your own reactions to stress.

# Ten Strategies to Help You Manage Your Stress

- 1 Aim to get seven to nine hours of sleep each night.** Research has shown that getting five hours, or less, of sleep a night can create health problems in the longer term. Getting enough sleep also helps you to better deal with the stresses of everyday life.
- 2 Prioritize so that you don't feel overwhelmed.** Regularly review and analyze the tasks that you perform at work and at home and try to determine which ones are necessary and which ones can be eliminated or reserved for a later date.
- 3 If you regularly commute long periods of time to work and back, try to reduce your stress levels on the road.** You might try leaving a bit earlier and taking the back roads to enjoy the scenery or avoid traffic congestion; listening to your favourite CDs (books or music); carpooling with others or taking public transit so that you don't always have to drive; and keeping your car clean, comfortable and stocked with healthy snacks and beverages.
- 4 Take care of your physical well-being.** Eat to stay strong and healthy. Doing so fuels you with the needed energy for life's everyday challenges. Consider decreasing or discontinuing your caffeine intake. Caffeine is a drug that creates a stress reaction in your body, and can cause you to feel nervous and have problems sleeping. Exercise regularly: endorphin production following physical activity is nature's gift to you for stress management!
- 5 Utilize all of your vacation time.** Everyone needs some time off to de-compress. Even if you are not going away, try having a picnic lunch by the water, setting up a hammock in a shady spot in your back yard to read, or visiting a spa for the day. If you do go away, try coming back a day early so that you have time to get organized and unpacked before you start work again.
- 6 If you get sick, stay home.** If you need to, take the time you need to get better.
- 7 Plan ahead.** It can go a long way towards reducing stress and anxiety. This might mean planning your menu for the week or even making your meals for the week on the weekend and keeping them in the freezer, or writing down your tasks for the next day, the day before. It also means keeping your financial life on track, by deciding what you want for you and your family, getting professional advice from a qualified financial advisor and gathering the resources you require to achieve your long-term goals, while also planning for the unexpected.

*Keep a stress diary for a month. Write down the events that triggered your stress, and how you reacted to these events. Are you happy with how you reacted, or, are there some ways you could better react in future?*



**8 Set firm boundaries between your work and non-work time.** You can choose *not* to respond to that e-mail you received at one in the morning! Build in a time buffer within your work and/or home schedule on a regular basis where you schedule NOTHING, so that you may use this time to regroup, relax, or take care of unexpected things.

**9 Write down 3 things you are thankful for each day, even if you find it hard.** It will help you focus on the positive instead of the negative. In other words, count your blessings, not your troubles. If you can manage it, volunteer in your community for an organization or people in need. It may help you to put things in perspective when you see how others can have even more serious sources of stress in their lives.

**10 Create a strong support system.** Develop meaningful relationships with co-workers, your family, your friends, and your higher power. Discuss stress management techniques with your loved ones, and how you can implement them in your everyday lives. If you need ideas, more strategies to use with children are outlined later in this brochure.

### **IMAGINE...**

*... that you have two little people with you at all times – one on each shoulder. One is a friendly little buddy who cheers for you, says good things about you and sticks up for you. The other is a mean, critical bully who points out all your mistakes and calls you nasty names. Now, which one should you be listening to? Your positive buddy, of course! Being your own best friend is a great way to manage your stress. Best friends are kind, understanding, and encourage us when we have disappointments. Sure, they acknowledge when we make mistakes, but they don't dwell on them and they help us celebrate our successes.*

# Kids Have Stress Too!

Why is it important to be aware of how stress affects children? **Well, evidence indicates that too many environmental stresses early in a child's life can have negative effects on his/her overall long-term development.** In fact, external stressors can have more physical effects on the nervous systems of very young children than they do on older individuals, and can alter the course of brain development. The outcome of chronic stress in children can be increased health problems, learning difficulties and socialization problems. The good news is that parents and caregivers are often in the best position to teach their children life-long stress management skills, and there are many strategies that can help!

*“ Stress can infect and affect the physical, emotional, intellectual and academic well being of children. It can interfere with their motivation, attention, perception, memory and the entire learning process. There is a stress management technology and methodology that can help make them more stress-resistant and help them deal with their stressors in an appropriate and constructive manner.”*

*– Dr. Harold Minden, Professor Emeritus, York University, Department of Psychology, and former Trustee of The Psychology Foundation of Canada*





# Helping Your Children (and Ultimately You) to Manage Stress

*Stress management strategies help children to gain a sense of control, learn how to relax, and develop a 'can do' attitude.*

– Kids Have Stress Too!®  
Program, The Psychology  
Foundation of Canada

There are many things that can bring on stress. For example, the beginning of the school year is often stressful for children and families because of all of the things to do to get ready for school, the new situations that children will be exposed to – new teachers, new activities – and the increased pace of life that this time of the year can bring. Normal stressors, like having too much school work, or exposure to world disasters on TV, are a part of everyday life and ones over which a child has some control. Long-term stressors, such as a marriage break-up or moving to a new city, continue over a longer period of time and a child has little or no control over them. It is important to keep in mind that threats and challenges are individual: what may stress one person will not necessarily stress someone else. We all have our own unique perceptions, pre-dispositions and experiences.

Stress management is an extremely important skill for children to learn, because if children can learn to respond to stress in a healthy and constructive way early on, they will be more resilient and better able to cope with whatever life sends their way. The good news is that there are a number of simple but effective things that you can do to help your children manage stress, which will ultimately help you manage your own stress levels as well.

# SOME SIGNS OF STRESS IN CHILDREN

Most parents and caregivers can identify behavioural issues in children because these behaviours are visible. Some of these **BEHAVIOURS** might include: **Whining, Poor Listening, Crying, Nail Biting, Day Dreaming, Fighting with Friends & Family, Being Overly Cautious, Poor School Performance, Lack of Appetite or Eating More than Usual**

It is very important to remember that **STRESS** may be behind these behaviours that are seen.

If children are experiencing stress, their **bodies, minds** and **feelings** are also affected. Stress can result in the above kinds of behaviours, but physical, mental and emotional symptoms also occur when a child is under stress. These signs may not be as obvious as the behavioural signs, but they are there. For example, you might notice some of the behavioural signs above when a child is feeling afraid s/he might not be able to keep up with schoolwork when a new school year begins.

## BODY

Some **physical** signs of stress might include:

**Tense Muscles, Headaches or Stomach-aches, Rapid Heartbeat, Being Cold, Skin Rash, Shakiness, Disturbed Sleep, Fatigue, Illness**

## MIND

Some **mental** effects of stress might include:

**Poor Concentration, Whirling Mind, Forgetfulness, Difficulty Problem-Solving, Being Easily Distracted, Confusion, Being Irrational**

## FEELINGS

Some **feelings** that may indicate stress might include:

**Fear, Anxiety, Frustration, Sadness, Anger, Being Overwhelmed, Panic, Being Overly Sensitive, Irritability, Helplessness, Hopelessness, Feeling Threatened**



# Help Them Out:

## Stress Reduction Strategies for Children



*What's 'good for the goose' is good for the baby goose too: while the strategies outlined below are geared more towards children, healthy nutrition, regular exercise, getting enough sleep, relaxation techniques and trying to eliminate or reduce stressors are still the best basis for effective stress management at any age!*

- 1 Spend time with your kids.** Find some creative and fun things to do with the whole family, such as making dinner together, and encourage your children to come up with their own ideas for activities. Make sure to laugh a lot in the process! Laughter is a great stress buster.
- 2 Ask your child regularly if there is anything that worries them, and listen carefully to what they say.** If there is something worrying them, help them choose what to do next, and then later ask if it helped. Pay attention though: if you think your child (or even yourself) may be dealing with stress that seems more serious than usual, like depression, an eating disorder, or anxiety disorder, consider seeking some additional information and/or professional help from your family doctor. Show your children every day that you love them by giving them a hug or telling them how much you care.

**3 Be careful not to overload your child with too many competitive activities outside of school.** Sometimes the best cure for stress is just to have some quiet time or to have them be involved in a variety of non-competitive activities in the community or at home, like volunteering at a community centre or walking the dog. Doing nothing sometimes is fine too!

**4 Help to create consistency and structure in your child's life.** Certain times of transition, like back to school time, can be more stressful for your child. Try creating and agreeing on morning and bedtime routines, and other activities that help to provide some consistency.

**5 Create a stress management activity list as a family and post it in your house.** Then, suggest that family members go to the list and choose one of the tips to use when they are feeling stressed. If they come up with new ones that work, ask them to add the tips to the list so that everyone can benefit from using the new strategies too.



# For Further Information

## PUBLICATIONS

*Better Sleep for Your Baby and Child: A Parent's Step-by-step Guide to Healthy Sleep Habits*, by Dr. Shelly K. Weiss.

*Families & Time: Keeping Pace In A Hurried Culture*, by Dr. Kerry J. Daly.

*The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, by David Elkind.

*The Little Book of Stress Relief*, by David Posen, MD.

*Make Your Workplace Great: The 7 Keys to an Emotionally Intelligent Organization, and The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*, by Dr. Steven J. Stein.

*Power Over Stress: 35 Quick Prescriptions for Mastering the Stress in Your Life*, by Kenford Nedd, MD.

*Why Men Never Remember and Women Never Forget*, by Marianne J. Legato, MD, FACP. Chapters included in this book discuss the changing face of parenting, depression in men and women, and why men and women respond differently to stress (and why it matters). Dr. Legato is Founder of the Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine at Columbia University.

### Parentbooks

1-800-209-9182 / 416-537-8334 or [parentbooks.ca](http://parentbooks.ca)

(Bookstore that sells a variety of books for parents, caregivers and professionals)

## WEB SITES

### About Kids Health

[www.aboutkidshealth.ca](http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca)

### Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

Take the short work-life balance quiz on this site to find out if you are in balance. The CMHA has chapters across Canada with various local services and programs.

[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

### Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)

The CPA can direct you to provincial and territorial associations to help you find a psychologist, or provide you with further information on psychology in Canada.

[www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca) ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org) – American)

### Centre For Addiction and Mental Health

[www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net)

### Centre for Studies on Human Stress

(Douglas Mental Health University Institute, McGill University)

Web site that provides information on the nature of stress, additional tips on coping with stress, a youth corner, newsletter and more.

[www.douglasrecherche.qc.ca/groups/stress/general-public](http://www.douglasrecherche.qc.ca/groups/stress/general-public)

### Health Canada and Canada's Food Guide

Go to: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca), click on "Food and Nutrition" and "Canada's Food Guide" for information on healthy eating and nutrition.

### Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada

[www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca)

Visit this Web site to test your stress levels, find information on healthy eating, exercise tips, children's exercise needs, and more.

### Kids Help Phone

An organization that provides twenty-four hour, confidential phone and online service, offering counseling, information and support to kids.

**1-800-668-6868** or [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

### Mental Health Canada

Comprehensive directory of mental health professionals included here.

[www.mentalhealthcanada.com](http://www.mentalhealthcanada.com)

### Mindyourmind.ca

A site for youth by youth, that provides information, resources and tools to help them manage stress, crisis and mental health problems.

[www.mindyourmind.ca](http://www.mindyourmind.ca)

### The Offord Centre For Child Studies

[www.offordcentre.com](http://www.offordcentre.com)

### The Psychology Foundation of Canada

[www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org)

### Kids Have Stress Too!®

Some of the information and strategies in this brochure related to young children are taken from The Psychology Foundation of Canada's *Kids Have Stress Too!*® (KHST!) Program, currently running across Canada. (Creator: Claire McDerment, B.Sc.(N), R.N.) *Kids Have Stress Too!*® helps parents and caregivers understand childhood stress and how to provide children with the tools to deal with stress effectively. The Psychology Foundation of Canada also offers other programs like *Parenting for Life* and *Diversity in Action*.

[www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org)

The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Desjardins Financial Security are pleased to partner to bring you the information in this booklet.

## **The Psychology Foundation of Canada**

**The Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC)** is a national registered charity that supports parents and strengthens families through a number of initiatives including creating educational resources, developing training programs for professionals, and delivering community-based education. Founded in 1974 to promote the understanding and use of sound psychological knowledge to better people's lives, the Foundation is guided by a Board of Trustees comprised of psychologists and business and community leaders. PFC's programs, like *Kids Have Stress Too!*<sup>®</sup>, *Parenting for Life* and *Diversity in Action*, help Canadians better understand how to manage situations and relationships more effectively at home, school, community and work. To find out more, or to order materials, please visit PFC's Web sites at [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org) or [www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org).

## **Desjardins Financial Security<sup>®</sup>**

Desjardins Financial Security, a subsidiary of Desjardins Group, the largest integrated cooperative financial group in Canada, specializes in group and individual life and health insurance, and savings products and services. Every day, over 5 million Canadians rely on Desjardins Financial Security to ensure their financial security. With a staff of nearly 3,900 employees, Desjardins Financial Security manages and administers close to \$22 billion in assets from offices in major cities across the country, including Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, Québec, Lévis, Halifax and St. John's.

Desjardins Financial Security is committed to improving awareness of mental health promotion through a number of partnerships as well as its annual Health is Cool! survey. To find out more information about the Health is Cool! survey and other mental health promotion initiatives, please visit our Web site at [www.healthiscool.ca](http://www.healthiscool.ca).

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**Design:** Desjardins Financial Security



# Feeling rushed puts pressure on kids.

It's hard for kids to understand why they're being rushed. If mornings are too rushed, make a little more time by getting clothes, lunches and backpacks ready the night before. Set aside time to play or just unwind and relax – it helps take the pressure off everybody.

Remember, parents can slow down the pace.



*Kids Have Stress Too!*<sup>®</sup>  
is a Program of The Psychology Foundation  
of Canada. For more information, go to  
[www.kidshavestresstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestresstoo.org).



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