

## FAMILY STRESS

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**Keywords:** stress, family, child, coping skills

**Abstract:** Stress is a way that our body responds to the demands made upon us by the environment, our relationships, and our perceptions and interpretations of those demands. Stress appears to be the natural outcome of the demands that life places on individuals and families marital conflict, crowded housing, divorce, incompatibility of ideas, alcoholism, sexual problems, etc. Family members who cannot face the stress are reserved, silent, anxious, uninterested in anything or contrary agitated, annoyed. Lack of unconditional love and support from family, together with the lack of self-confidence, safety, security and last but not the least a low degree of socialization, give rise to aggression or depression, and the consequences on health affect the nervous circulatory, endocrine and immune system.

### INTRODUCTION

"If you are alive, there is stress in your life."  
Hans Selye

We live in the century of speed/technology century and life rhythm is extremely accelerated.

We spend more time on social networks, rather than in the family. The price we have to pay to exist in the modern world is often too high, forcing us to constantly challenge ourselves, as a result, producing a continuous stress.

Because of the hellish rhythm imposed by our society, we have more and more difficulty finding our place and balance. This way, family life begins to be affected by a crisis that has multiple causes. True and important values (such as love, friendship, empathy) are often forgotten and modern humans turn their attention to other "values" imposed by society: competitiveness, consumption power, material goods.(1) Lack of affection and attention causes fears and frustrations, and gradually, the spouses become estranged from each other.

What we often forget is that men and women live in couples not only because nature made them complementary in terms of sex, but because, together, it is easier to cope with the difficulties of life. Even the most powerful and harmonious couples may face, at some point, the effects of stress, which can be present in many different ways: general weakness, insomnia, loss of appetite or, contrary, bulimia, decreased immunity, lack of sexual attraction, nervousness, lack of communication in the couple.(2)

The demands of our everyday life create a tension, called stress thus being a natural outcome of our activities. It is crucial for us to understand the impact of stress on both individuals and families, and know to apply preventive and adaptational measures.(3)

### PURPOSE

Highlighting the particularities of family stress with emphasis on children and adolescents, stress sources and reduction and adaptation measures to stress.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper implies the analysis of the major family generated stress aspects that is based on the historic-bibliographic method. The study is based on 60 bibliographic references published during the last 15 years (Romania, USA, Great Britain, Ukraine, Russia, Spain, Canada and Korea). Out of the analyzed sources, in the description we used 25 sources.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At individual level, stress is defined as an interfering factor that destroys mental and physical health of a person and occurs when the body is asked for more than it can normally provide.(4)

Family is the basic cell of a happy and peaceful society. Often we believe that we know everything about family, but its scientific background is not simple at all, therefore there is a list of unresolved questions and problems – starting from the historical family development all the way to its structure and function, the relations towards the society, the internal relations and dynamics.(2,5,6) For the child, the family is an irreplaceable environment where he is formed as a person, where he lives satisfying some of his/her most important needs that can be satisfied only within the family.(1,7)

The inclusion of the individual in the social occurs particularly through the familial, professional and group fields. These three areas constitute the universe of individuals and are major sources of social support and social possible stress sources.(5,8)

Family stress generally, originates from relationships between spouses. To experience it, there is not an absolute necessity of an event that exceeds the capacity to cope with things, to happen just the threat that such an event will occur - may be sufficient.(3)

Family stress can be defined as a real or imagined imbalance between the demands on the family and the family's ability to meet and cope with those demands. In the definition of family stress, the demands in the family are commonly referred to as stressors.(8,9)

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Article received on 18.06.2017 and accepted for publication on 25.08.2017  
ACTA MEDICA TRANSILVANICA September 2017;22(3):14-17

Stress can ruin families. In Western countries, the high rate of divorce is partly caused by high stress level at work, especially if both spouses work. When there is a child in the family, stress can generate a conflict between his education and parent's career.(5,4)

The seriousness of the family stress is highly affected by the way a family perceives and overcomes the stressor. This perception reflects the family's values and its previous experience in dealing with stress, change and meeting crisis. A family's outlook can vary from seeing life stresses as challenges to be met to considering a stressor as uncontrollable and the beginning of ruin for the family.(1,7)

It is important to remember that what is a stressor for one family may not be a stressor for another family. Some families may have developed positive coping mechanisms for the stress in their life. Other families may find the stress too much to deal with.(3)

### Stress sources in the family

The analysis of the specialty literature points out a very large number of stress sources in the family: family planning, childbirth, child behaviour, job that is located away from the family (in another country), marital conflict, paraconjugal conflict (with the parents in-law, parents or close relatives), health problems, children with disabilities, job loss, infertility, postpartum period, menopause, crowded housing, change of residence, purchase of house, car, unemployment, divorce, abuse and neglect, incompatibility of ideas, concerns, attitudes, struggle for dominance, lack of affection and respect, alcoholism, financial, sexual problems, exposure to intimate partner violence, inequality in attitudes towards children, the loss/death of a spouse or parents, elderly parents, etc., lack of activity (in old age) etc.(4,5,8,10,11,12)

Research found that one of the most stressful events is the death of a partner, with stress level of 100%. Having a family member in prison implies a level of over 60% stress. Marriage, childbirth, illness, job loss, retirement generates stress level of almost 50%.(4)

A stress level of about 75% is caused by divorce or separation of spouse.(4) Although, the long term effect on children of divorce or separation is not yet fully established, however we know that does not help the emergence of an unstressed generation of children.(10)

The build-up of several major events in a short period of time increases the risk of stress.(4)

Parents of children with special needs have higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing than parents with non-disabled children. Among the factors that influence the levels of stress include the child's sleep and behavior difficulties, material resources of the family, employment situation of parents, social support, unfulfilled service needs, and parents' situation handling strategies.(13,14)

It is important to recognize that a child with developmental issues does not necessarily mean a family with problems. Families make a wide range of accommodations, or functional responses to having a child with delays in development (scheduling the activities, arranging care, organizing mealtimes, play, family visits, support services). This does not necessarily contribute to exceptionally elevated levels of stress, emotional dilemmas, or family struggles.(14)

Children's functional activity limitations and family stressors are significant correlates of psychosocial adjustment among children with disabilities. These data indicate a need for routine screening for mental health problems among children with disabilities, as well as a family-oriented approach to their medical care.(5,15)

### Stress in adolescents and children

Causes of stress in children:

- *at school.* Among the sources of stress are included unstructured classroom, fear of failure, confusing or not reasonable expectations.
- *at home.* Stress can be a result of a bad diet, a lack of family routines, over scheduling, very long or serious disease, financial problems, family conflicts or abuse, too high expectations or a shift in the family situation.
- *peer-related.* Stress can come from changing schools, having to deal with a bully, trying to fit in with the crowd, or moving to a new community.

Stress has the tendency to be additive and with children can induce inappropriate behaviours, academic difficulties, or problems regarding their health. Parents can usually look back over recent events and see the causes of the behavior through the building of stressful situations.(16)

During the past two decades, a big portion of research focused on the family stress model that analyzed family-based pathways through which stress caused by financial problems is associated with negative child result. These studies have proved that less positive parenting behaviours are a result of high levels of parental and interparental distress, and financial problems, which are- respectively - linked with child and adolescent externalizing these problems through behaviour.(5,8,17)

A study realized by Ponnet, Wouters, Goedeme & Mortelmans (2012) revealed the family stress model and applied its principles to families in Belgium. They expanded prior studies on the process of family stress and incorporated data from both parents and children. In their research data from 340 families was processed, with parents evaluating their financial stress, symptoms of depression and conjugal disagreements, and parents and children evaluating positive parenting behaviours and children's externalizing problem behaviours.(17)

The results revealed that the association between financial stress and the problem of children's behaviour was caused by depressive symptoms, conjugal conflicts, and positive parenting. The authors included data from both parents and a child, and explored pathways within (actor) and between (partner) parents. They found that financial stress was directly and indirectly affecting disagreements between parents. Furthermore, positive parenting from fathers was more influenced by financial stress than that of mothers. In spite of the fact that actor effects were more salient, they also found evidence for partner effects. The results emphasize the significance of incorporating multiple family members in studies that tackle the processes of family stress.(17)

Even very young children are affected by family stress. While each day offers stimulating new experiences for young children, some chronic stressful experiences can damage the rapidly growing brain of a young child. Family turmoil in early childhood can disrupt the architecture of the brain leading to increased risk of developmental delay and a host of long-term health problems, including alcoholism, depression, eating disorders and other chronic diseases.(1) Symptoms of stress in children: irritability or uncommon, emotionality or volatility; difficulty sleeping or nightmares; failure to concentrate; eating problems; headaches or stomach-aches; unexplained fears or increased anxiety; regression to earlier developmental levels; isolation from family activities or peer relationships; drug or alcohol experimentation.(18,19)

### Reduction and adaptation to stress

In order to reduce stress it is not enough to pretend that nothing happened. When stressful events occur it is necessary, unhurried, to assess the life style. A list of priorities

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can be made and it is favourable to make some changes in order to reorganize the life.(4)

Developing skills to respond to crisis occurs over time. How families accomplish this is called family coping. It is often the strength of families.(19)

Coping is what one does with resources both from inside the family and throughout the community. It is the action the family takes to remove the stressor, live with the hardships, or develop new resources in response to a crisis.(11)

Community resources and public services are available for lessening the effects of chronic stresses on your child's health and development.(4)

### *Factors that help prevent stress*

- skills for solving problems in a positive way and strategies to work them out;
- relationships that are caring and beneficial at home and school, with colleagues and adults;
- expectations that are definite and precise;
- acceptance and ability to learn from errors;
- development of academic, social, extracurricular, and skills;
- persistent, positive self-control;
- capability to express feelings accordingly;
- feeling physically and emotionally safe;
- good eating habits and exercise;
- time to relax or do recreational activities.(16)

### *How Parents Can Help their children*

- be aware of your child's behaviours and feelings;
- build trust with your child;
- be available and open to talk when your child is ready. If family circumstances are contributing to the stress, be willing to answer questions honestly and calmly;
- encourage the expression of feelings;
- encourage your child to tell you if he or she feels overwhelmed;
- encourage physical activity, good eating habits, and relaxation;
- teach your child to settle disagreements and solve problems;
- tell your child of family changes that are anticipated, in an age-appropriate way. Acknowledge that change can feel uncomfortable but reassure him or her that the family will be okay;
- do not hide the truth from your child. Children sense parents' worry and the unknown can be scarier than the truth;
- help your child have a part in decision-making when appropriate;
- emphasize to your child that he/she has the ability to pass the tough times, and that family and friends will always love and support them;
- track any television programs that could bother your child and be careful to the use of the Internet, movies and computer games;
- assist your child in selecting the extracurricular activities that are appropriate for him/her;
- make your child aware of the damaging effects that drugs and alcohol have before experimentation begins;
- track your own level of stress. Take care of yourself;
- connect with your child's teacher asking about any worries and make them part of the team available to assist your child;
- ask for the help of a physician, school counsellor, school psychologist, or school social worker if stress continues to

be a concern.(16,19)

Regarding families with children that have special needs, institutions for help and support should focus on the needs of the entire family, and not only on the needs of the child with developmental disabilities. There are researchers that emphasize that although parents of children with developmental disabilities experience big stress, they also experience an immense happiness with every success of their child. These parents consider that their child has special needs and not problems. The parents of the children with developmental disabilities have special needs - need for information, advice, support and practical help, and need for their inclusion in every phase of identification and assessment of their child. For accomplishment of these needs, it is necessary to combine the formal and informal social networks for support and adaptation. The informal support can diminish or moderate the effect of stress. The services for help and support should be focused on the needs of all family members, and not only on the problems of the child with developmental disabilities.(16,20,21,22)

### **The characteristics of families that can manage stress:**

- They do things as a family. They work hard at keeping the family functioning. When under stress, it is very easy for family members to withdraw from each other. Just because families live under the same roof does not mean they do things together.
- They build esteem in each other and themselves. They show appreciation for each other and let other members know they understand. It is very common for a family member's self-esteem to be affected when stress occurs. Families who do a good job of managing stress take care of themselves physically and mentally. They build their own self-esteem.
- They develop social support within the community. Families are better able to endure hardships if they reach out to the community instead of becoming isolated from it. Meeting new friends, joining clubs, using community facilities are examples of utilizing community supports.
- They enjoy the lifestyle they have chosen and can endure the hardships of that lifestyle better than those who are not satisfied with their current way of life. For example, a homemaker who enjoys that lifestyle and is supported by family and friends will feel less stress than the person who would rather be away from home but for various reasons cannot.
- They develop and use a range of tension-reducing devices. Examples are exercise, relaxation, a positive outlook, and keeping involved in active ties. These techniques help manage the tensions and conflicts that are a part of family life.(9)
- Effective communication, opened and constant;
- Flexibility in roles;
- Tolerance for individuality of each member and different generations;
- Democratic relations with the right to decision;
- Agreement to start new things.(11,19)

In order to reduce the stress of harmonizing work and family, employees with families must be able to have work schedules that are flexible allowing them to spend quality time in their families, with their children and spouses for important family occasions.(4,13)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although in modern society there are many

problems in the couple life, yet, the basic unit of a society should be the happy and peaceful family consisting of husband, wife and their children.

Stress can generate a real havoc in the couple life, if both of the partners do not constantly focus their attention on maintaining balance, through several simple methods: minimization of the severity of unpleasant life situations, encouragement of the partner who is going through a difficult time, logical, well-reasoned and calm dialogue, keeping a sense of humour, highlighting the positive sides in every situation, regular sexual activity, calming, comforting and attention for the life partner, common pursuit of relaxing activities.

When analyzing the relationship between stress and quality of the relationship in a couple, a series of mediating variables must be investigated/explored, including the spouses ability adapt to stressful situations and to provide support to one another.

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