

extension families coping with stress

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Rapid social and economic changes have placed American families under unusual stress—and that includes families of Extension professionals.

We're known for our dedication and commitment, and are proud to have one of the strongest networks ever established for promoting the maintenance and strengthening of family life. Yet, while encouraging strength in other people's families, *we sometimes are left with little time and energy to devote to our own.* So, let's examine some of the factors that contribute to stress in our families and steps that Extension professionals can take to survive in style.

Contributing Stressors

We're caught in the uncharted process of redefining social and sexual roles. This has left us uncertain at times and has increased the amount and kinds of decision making between men and women. Some people long for the "olden days" when there were clear-cut role definitions and most behaviors weren't negotiable, but were automatically performed.

Most of us also feel little ripples of stress brought on by the redefinition of the traditional work ethic. "New breed" workers are seriously considering the effects of promotions and new assignments on their family life. Some are suggesting that the measure of success may not be how quickly and how high you rise in an organization, but rather how rich your total life system is over the long term. The process of defining and redefining our commitment to work and family is continual.

Both inflation and the women's movement have spurred dramatic increases in employment for married women. In 1975, nearly half of all wives (44%) were in the labor force.¹

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The stresses on the single-parent and the popular-blended family have received considerable publicity. But, another family form that has been adopted by increasing numbers of Extension workers, dual-career parenting, has also multiplied family stressors. Dual-career parents are confronted daily with the question of whether they can combine the demands of full-time work with quality parenting. The resulting stresses are prompting increasing numbers of family therapists to wonder if this lifestyle should be encouraged in its present form.

Mothers working professionally seem to bear a disproportionate share of familial stress. Many must deal with shifting societal values that on the one hand encourage the fulfillment of women through careers, but on the other hand question the acceptability of women as achievers and competitors in the work place. In addition to this intangible stressor, most women shoulder the majority of household responsibilities—in spite of the rise of an ethic that encourages a more egalitarian division of roles.²

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Issues To Ponder

During the upcoming White House Conference on Families, Extension can continue to play a leadership role in encouraging citizens to examine how public policies support (or don't support) families and children. This may also be a good time to examine ourselves to see how our traditionally family-supporting institution might become even more supportive of today's families. How can we be more supportive of single-parent families, families with aging members, and families that are juggling responsibilities as parents and full-time workers?

One question we need to look at is how important it is to us (in Extension and in society) to have people who do a good job of rearing children. More and more talented young couples are choosing *not* to have children, and many times their decision is at least partially based on the belief that parenting is simply not worth all the hassles.

What roles do we want to see fathers taking in parenthood? Feldman and Feldman examined the effects of father-

present and father-absent families on 880 school-aged children. Their major finding was that the father's level of participation in the family was so low when he was present that his absence wasn't a significant factor in the child's development. The Feldmans did find, however, that children of more interactive fathers had greater self-esteem and performed better in school than their "less-fathered" peers.³

What roles do we want women to play in parenthood and in the world of work? Columnist Ellen Goodman has suggested that people may no longer automatically assume working mothers are bad for their children, but rather that children are bad for their mother's work. She continues:

We have wrongly defined the "best worker" as the least encumbered: the one who is free to travel and work overtime, the one who has ties to no one but the corporation. . . . I am aware, of course, of the extra pressure children bring to our lives in terms of time and energy. There is an inherent conflict between workaholicism and a rich family life. Moreover, we have rotten support systems for working mothers—impossible service industries, impoverished day care. . . . But our work may, in fact, depend much more on skills that are reinforced by living with children: the ability to listen, the ability to judge and to fill unexpressed needs. The experience of having benign authority. The juggling act of doing many things at the same time. Child-raising is a crash course in self-knowledge.⁴

If parenthood enhances our contributions at work, how might we make the two more compatible? Could there be accommodations such as flexible working hours, extended maternity and paternity leaves, and permanent part-time jobs that would allow both mothers and fathers to make meaningful contributions in the world of work and, at the same time, provide nurturing environments for their children?

Making the Most of Family Time

We may never resolve the question of how much time is enough to sustain growing relationships within the family, yet the notion of quality time is critical to Extension professionals on tight schedules.

Closeness

"Closeness" is a special characteristic that quality time provides. It can occur during planned activities or during everyday family routines. Gershenfeld of Temple University lists four basic elements to the quality of closeness: conversational physical proximity, eye contact, and touching.⁵ Her idea is that we retain information better if it comes to us via more than one sense. For example, a parent who sits on the bed

and tucks a child in with a kiss, and also talks with the child is providing a context for closeness. On the other hand, a parent who calls "goodnight" to a child while going downstairs is achieving little closeness.

Quality time can't be forced, but with effort each family member can become more aware of opportunities for meaningful interactions. A game of cards, a chat while doing the dishes, a shared cup of coffee are examples of ordinary unplanned activities that can be transformed into quality time if you focus on the interaction, not the activity.

Guidelines Several guidelines may be helpful in using your available energy most effectively for family interaction.

1. Assess the level and amount of energy you have available. Remember, it's quality, not quantity, that counts.
2. Tell other family members how you feel, especially when you're tired, cranky, sad, or anxious. It helps to indicate, particularly to children, how far you're willing to interact with them. "I'm feeling very tired today and can't play with you, but I'll be glad to watch you play." Clearly communicating how you feel and what you're willing or unwilling to do will enhance family interactions and clarify expectations.
3. Set aside time each day, in advance, to spend with each family member. The time may be short, but it will be special if it's planned, and your attention is free to concentrate on the other person. When you're spending that special time with another family member, try not to let your mind wander to shopping lists, dirty laundry, or tomorrow's agenda. This idea of a special time each day is especially important for children, but it's also a real bonus for parents because the day-to-day hustle deprives us of many opportunities to notice and cherish the growth and development of our children.
4. Let your child or spouse know when you feel you've expended all available energy. Tell your child, in particular, that "I'm feeling rushed right now, so let's continue the game after dinner." Be sure to keep your promise.
5. Increase your self-awareness so you can recognize signs of stress. Headaches, backaches, crying spells, and grouchiness are ways our bodies may tell us we're

under stress. Stress can be managed if we learn to *accept its inevitability and develop strategies to cope* with it.

Reducing Stress

Here are some suggestions for relaxation and stress reduction:

1. Enjoy 20 minutes of uninterrupted quiet. Sit comfortably with you eyes closed. Chant aloud the word "calm" or any other soothing word. Then let yourself chant mentally. Simply sit, hearing that mental repetition of the word. If you daydream or your mind wanders, guide your attention back to the chant. Do this daily and in a few months you may notice a new kind of relaxation in your life. (Any activity that will relax you is good; listen to music, take a walk, read, or nap.)
2. Engage in recreation. Reduce sameness and monotony in your life by involving yourself in something different, such as a hobby, sports, music lessons, etc. Balance work with recreation each day, if possible.
3. Take one thing at a time. When you're tense, you may see a mountain of problems and tasks in front of you. Isolate a single concern and deal with it. Chances are the other things can wait.
4. Learn to say NO to requests that you can't reasonably handle, and don't feel guilty about it.
5. Don't keep anxiety and anger bottled up. Talk to someone you feel comfortable with.
6. Set reasonable goals and expectations for yourself. Revise them often.
7. Stress, anxiety, and/or depression may occur chronically over an extended period of time. These feelings may prevent you from functioning effectively each day. If this occurs, seek help from a mental health professional.

Summary

A number of social and economic changes—including the redefinition of social and sexual roles as well as the emergence of an ethic that encourages recurring evaluations on one's commitment to work and family—have been **stressful** for all families.

The White House Conference on Families provides an impetus for us to examine the ways in which families of Extension professionals, as well as the families we serve, can be strengthened and supported by our organization.

Efforts to counteract stress and an awareness of the principles of quality time can enhance the time busy professionals share with their families.

Footnotes

1. Paul C. Glick and Arthur J. Norton, *Marrying, Divorcing and Living Together in the U.S. Today* (Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, Inc., February, 1979).
2. Marianne Ferber and Joan Huber, "Husbands, Wives, and Careers," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XLI (May, 1979), 315-25.
3. Harold Feldman, "Why We Need a Family Policy," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XLI (August, 1979), 453-55.
4. Ellen Goodman, "Having Children Can Be Good for Woman's Career," *Evening Journal*, Wilmington, Delaware, April 10, 1979, p. 20.
5. Carol Saline, "How To Have Great Times with Our Children," *Redbook*, CLI (October, 1978), 125.