



THE TEMPLE UNIVERSITY COLLABORATIVE ON
COMMUNITY INCLUSION
of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities

stress reduction

EMOTIONAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

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introduction

BEING A PARENT CAN BE STRESSFUL FOR ANYONE. Being a parent with a psychiatric disability requires that you manage your psychiatric disability and your family at the same time. It can be difficult to be fully attentive to your children or your family's needs when you're experiencing the symptoms of your psychiatric disability. For that reason, you need to do all you can to take care of yourself physically and emotionally.

In the module on Physical Health and Well-Being, we talk about important benefits of taking care of your physical health. In this module on Emotional Health and Well-Being, we discuss how you can reduce your stress by taking care of your mental and emotional health. Working at staying healthy emotionally will reduce your stress; it might even improve your mental health so you have fewer symptoms or less of a need for emergency interventions. Furthermore, reducing your stress by maintaining good emotional health will allow you to be a more responsive parent and a healthier person overall.



take care of your mental health

One way to keep your stress level low involves staying on track with your mental health. First, if you take medications for your psychiatric disability, you should work with your mental health treatment providers to make sure you are comfortable with the medications you are taking. Your doctor should work with you to minimize any side effects. Finding the medications that help alleviate your symptoms but also have few side effects is often a difficult balancing act. The best way to deal with this issue is to find a doctor you trust and to learn to advocate for yourself. If you are using private insurance, you can call the behavioral health customer service number on the back of your insurance card to locate new doctors within the areas of expertise that are listed in your insurance company's database. If you are using medical assistance, you can also call your customer service number, but you might have more limited choices. You can still advocate for what you need and why. Research has shown that people are more apt to take their medications as prescribed if they have good health care relationships — meaning people in recovery openly share information with their doctors and therapists about their health beliefs and their experiences with their psychiatric disabilities.¹

Attending your appointments with your mental health professionals regularly and sticking to your treatment plan are also important. If you are dissatisfied with these services, express your concerns to your provider and/or find a new provider if your concerns are not dealt with to your satisfaction. Likewise, if your treatment plan is not

Working on your psychiatric disability in a positive way will ultimately lead to a more stable existence and minimize your stress.

working for you, you should work with your providers to change it to suit your needs.

Research has shown positive outcomes when significant people in a recovering person's life receive information about their loved one's condition, as well as problem-solving and communication skills to reduce stressful interactions.² Because most behavioral health providers might not proactively talk to you about engaging your significant people in your treatment and recovery services, you can initiate this discussion. You can ask to sign a consent form permitting your provider to share whatever types of confidential information you choose with each person

you identify. It's better for your provider to share information verbally in sessions or scheduled phone appointments rather than in writing so your private information does not accidentally get into the wrong hands. If your significant people are offered information and support and included in decisions that affect them, they will be more likely to be cooperative and supportive, rather than inadvertently act in ways that are not helpful to you.

Another helpful tool is keeping a daily mood chart, diary card or journal to help you identify and remember patterns of improvements, setbacks and insights that you can discuss with your treatment providers. Some types of evidence-based therapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy, include these documentation tools to improve outcomes.

Working on your psychiatric disability in a positive way will ultimately lead to a more stable existence and minimize your stress.

time for yourself

IT IS OFTEN VERY DIFFICULT FOR MOTHERS, ESPECIALLY SINGLE PARENTS, TO CARVE OUT TIME FOR THEMSELVES. Young children have continual needs for feeding, dressing, bathing, etc. As your children get older, they may become more self-sufficient at home, but often they need assistance getting to and from activities and friends' houses. When they become teenagers, they may need you even more to consult with them about school, peers, sexuality, career choices and other issues of adolescence. Just as it is important for your mental health and your stress level that you find opportunities to do things with your children, it is also important to sometimes be able to do things by yourself without your children. This allows you to take time to be free of others' demands and think only of your needs. This

can be especially important if you have mental health challenges to contend with.

How do you find time to enjoy yourself?³

Decide how much time you can afford to be away from your family — it might be once or twice a week or once a month.

Schedule time to be alone or with a trusted friend. Find a babysitter if you need to. If you can't afford a babysitter, ask your friends or relatives to take your children for the day, or find a day when no one is home. You could take turns with another mother, watching her child for one day and having her watch your child on another day. If you can get away, make plans to travel somewhere for the day.

THINGS YOU CAN DO:

Do something that you have always wanted to do but never got around to, such as visiting a museum, seeing a movie or play, shopping at a special place, or hiking in the woods.

Relax at a local coffee shop or have a leisurely lunch at a local restaurant.

Do something good for your body, such as getting a massage, taking a relaxing bubble bath, or going for a swim or a bike ride.



family time



Spending time with your family or your other supporters can be just as important as getting alone time in terms of reducing your stress. Research has shown that people who have strong social support structures (including family, friends and pets, too) experience significantly less stress in their lives. Being with loved ones can make you feel good. Furthermore, once you communicate to them the kinds of things you find helpful, they might be able to offer assistance, insights and ideas in times of stress.⁴

Spending quality time with your children, your partner and your extended family can be an opportunity to get to know your family members, to strengthen family bonds, and to share and create family history. Positive experiences with your family build on each other. The more you spend quality time with your family, the more you and your family will want to spend time together. If there are unresolved conflicts or tensions due to the history of your relationships with certain family members, you can use your communication skills (see next section) or

perhaps even your therapy sessions to try to resolve these issues rather than let them continue to trigger hurt or anger.

Tips for Creating Quality Time With Your Children:

- Make the time you spend together a priority, and commit to it.⁵ As children get older, they will want to spend more time with their friends and they will have more activities in their schedules.⁶ Therefore, make sure to schedule family time (such as a family night), and be protective of this time together.
- Make the most out of the time you spend together, even if it is just doing daily tasks. For example, if you have younger children, bath time and bedtime might be important quality time for you to share as a family. If your children are older, the time you spend in the car taking them to activities or to friends' houses might be a chance to talk and understand their experiences. You could have your child help you cook dinner or shop for food with you, giving you an opportunity to spend time together.⁷

practice using effective communication skills



Quality relationships take work and skill, especially when needs conflict or tempers flare. Disciplining yourself to use the following skills can significantly improve the quality of your relationships and social network:

- Try to really listen and understand others' feelings and the needs that drive their feelings. Listening can help the people around you want to listen and understand you.
- Learn to pick your battles and make assertive requests rather than be passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive. People do not have a fair chance to meet your needs or understand your feelings if you do not express them. Thinking others should instinctively know and meet your needs is a setup for misunderstanding and disappointment. Also, letting anger or other feelings go unexpressed could increase your stress, and you might eventually express those feelings in ways you might regret.
- Know when you are too angry or frustrated to be effective. Ask to take a break so you can calm down and regroup rather than say words you cannot take back and possibly escalate conflict.

observing your personal limits and boundaries

By communicating your feelings and needs, you are observing your personal limits and boundaries. Personal limits have been described in the following way:

Personal limits, or boundaries, tell you where you end and others begin. Limits define who you are, what you believe, how you treat other people, and how you let other people treat you. Like the shell of an egg, limits give you form and protect you. Like the rules of a game, they bring order to your life and help you make decisions that can benefit you. Healthy limits are somewhat flexible, like a soft piece of plastic. You can bend them and they don't break. When your limits are overly flexible however, violations and intrusions can occur. You might take on the feelings and responsibilities of others and lose sight of your own. On the other hand, when your limits are too inflexible, people may view you as cold and distant.⁸

Once you notice that something another person is doing or not doing is causing you significant distress, or even annoyance, a skillful request can end the problem rather than let tension and resentment build. If the person is not willing or able to honor your request, you may have to employ effective consequences to ensure that you do not have to tolerate behavior that upsets you.

EFFECTIVE CONSEQUENCES HAVE THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS, ACCORDING TO THE ANGER CONTROL WORKBOOK⁹:

SPECIFIC — Your loved one should know what exact behavior will trigger what exact consequence.

CONSISTENT — You must monitor that behavior and make the consequence happen every time that exact behavior occurs.

REASONABLE — Be fair. Consequences that are too severely punishing will probably add to your loved one's anger and desire to test you.

DOABLE — Ask yourself, "Am I willing and able to make this consequence happen each time I know that this behavior has occurred?"

DE-ESCALATION SKILLS:

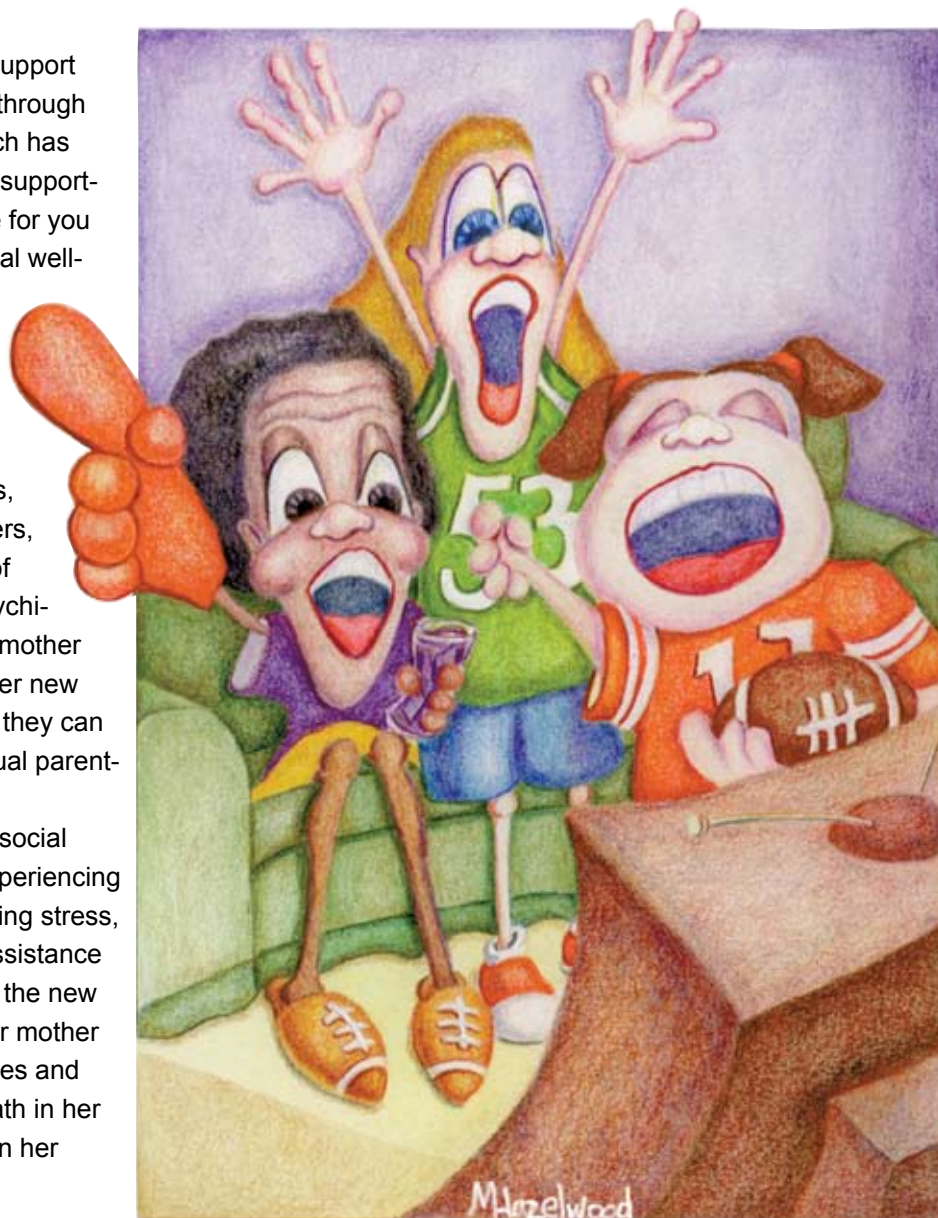
Sometimes others have difficulty with anger or self-control. If you are feeling frightened by another person's behavior, it is important to refrain from threatening consequences at that moment because threats can further trigger someone who is upset or agitated. Pay attention to your gut reaction of fear and uneasiness, and tell the person that his or her behavior is upsetting you. Also, try to validate the other person's feelings and concerns by saying things like, "I can see you are really angry, and I can understand why."¹⁰ If you can stay calm in these difficult situations, it is likely that the behavior of the person you are dealing with will become calmer.

surround yourself with positive support

Having a strong social support network can help you through difficult times. Research has shown that being with supporters who sincerely care for you contributes positively to your emotional well-being.¹¹ This is because supportive relationships provide a sense of belonging, an increased sense of self-worth and a feeling of security.¹²

Who are the people in your social support network? They can be friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, other mothers, people at your place of worship or peers in recovery from psychiatric disabilities. For example, a new mother might want to get together with another new mother she met at the playground so they can support each other through their mutual parenting experiences.

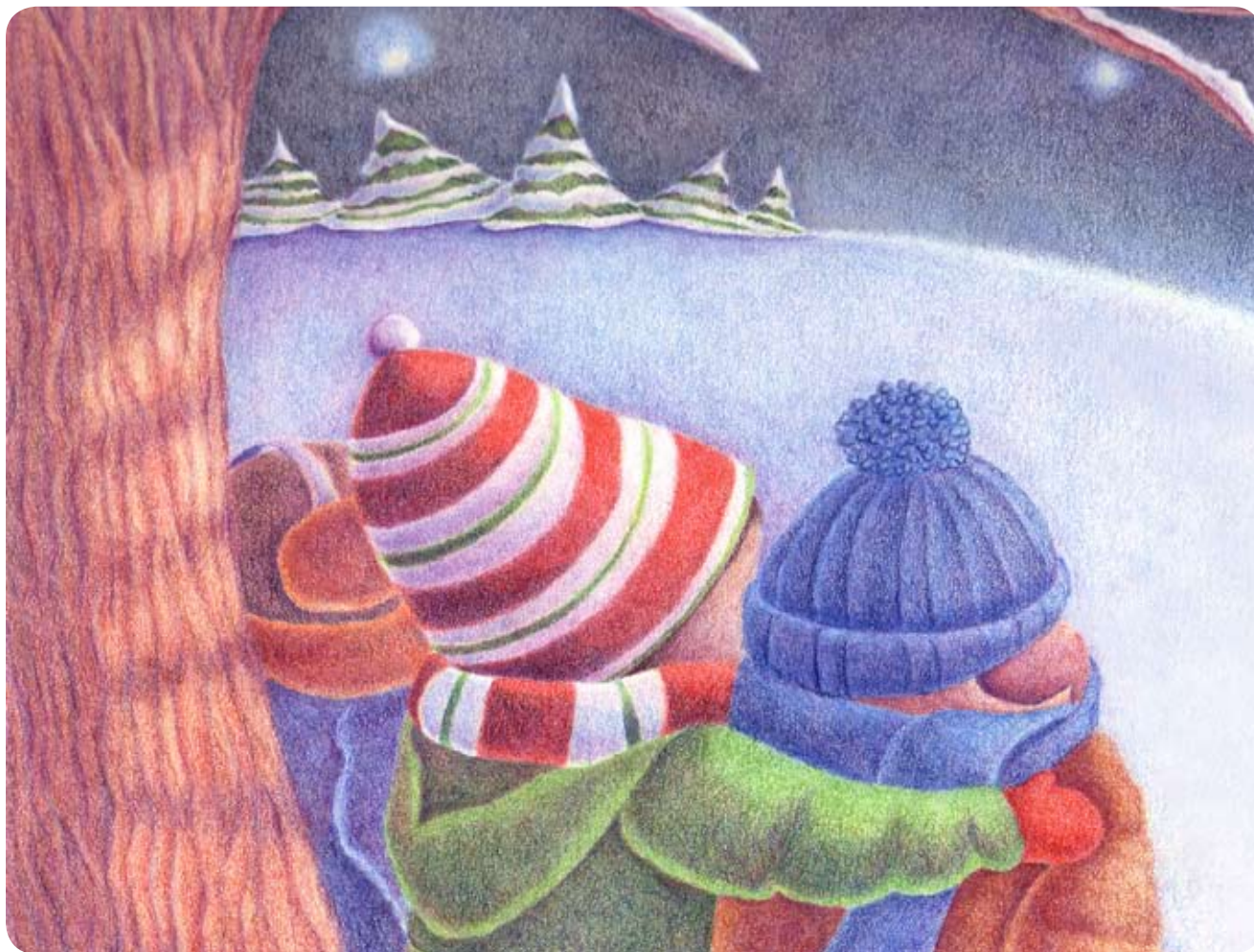
Note that you usually develop your social support network when you are not experiencing stress. Then when you are experiencing stress, you can turn to your supporters for assistance and comfort.¹³ In the example above, the new mother might be friends with the other mother for a long time, seeing her at play dates and evenings out, but when there is a death in her family, she might lean more heavily on her friend for support in her time of grief.



HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A STRONG SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK?¹⁴

- To have a friend, you need to be a friend. Listen and be there for your friends or family members when they are under stress.
- Stay in contact with people through phone calls, e-mail, social networking, and get-togethers.
- Don't compete with your friends and family members. Celebrate their accomplishments and successes.
- Remember to thank your family and friends. Say and do thoughtful things to express how important they are to you.

join a support group



When you are experiencing stress, particularly if it's related to your psychiatric disability, it might be helpful to join a support group. Support groups are groups of people who share common conditions or experiences, such as medical conditions, addiction, divorce and long-term caregiving. They are often established by nonprofit organizations, hospitals and clinics.¹⁵ Support groups differ from group therapy in that they are not focused on group process, but rather on support for the shared issue.¹⁶ Even though support groups are not group therapy, they can be led by mental health professionals such as nurses, social workers or psychologists.¹⁷ But more commonly, they are self-help groups, facilitated by peers. Support groups can be face-to-face or Internet-based (e.g., mailing lists, bulletin boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, blogs, social media sites).

THERE ARE A VARIETY OF BENEFITS TO JOINING A SUPPORT GROUP.

THEY INCLUDE:¹⁸

- Emotional release, emotional connection to others and support from others.
- Education about your issue or condition and how to cope with it.
- Less loneliness; knowledge that you are not alone.
- Motivation to deal with your condition in a positive way.
- A clearer understanding of what to expect with your condition.
- Reduction in distress, depression and anxiety.
- Hope.

stress-reduction exercises



Like relaxation techniques, stress-reduction exercises are designed to help your body and mind relax through physical activity. While all forms of exercise benefit your physical and mental well-being (see Physical Health and Well-Being module), some types of exercise are particularly helpful for stress relief. Examples are as follows:

YOGA — Yoga has many styles and forms. It can be a physically intense experience or a gentler experience. The core components of yoga include poses and breathing. Yoga poses, or postures, are movements and stances designed to increase flexibility, balance and strength. Yoga emphasizes controlled breathing to help control your body and quiet your mind. Traditional yoga practice also involves meditation.¹⁹

TAI CHI — Tai Chi was developed in ancient China as a form of self-defense. It has developed into a form of exercise that has been described as “meditation in motion” because of its gentle movements, which are designed to promote peacefulness in mind and body. Like yoga, Tai Chi has a variety of postures, styles and levels of intensity. The fluid postures and movements in Tai Chi keep your body in constant motion. Tai Chi also coordinates movement with breathing and focuses on the present.²⁰

WALKING — Walking can also be a helpful form of exercise. Walking is easy for just about anyone to do and can work into your schedule easily. You can walk with a friend or walk mindfully alone and meditate (as mentioned previously). You can walk briskly or comfortably and gain the benefits of being outdoors and engaging in physical, aerobic activity.²¹

follow your dream

A stylized illustration of a woman with dark hair and a yellow headband hugging a young girl with dark hair and a pink headband. The woman is wearing a grey top, and the girl is wearing a pink dress. They are both smiling. The background is a light blue gradient.

When most people think about reducing their stress, they think about vacations or recreation. But doing work you love can also be therapeutic and result in stress reduction. For some people, volunteering with others who need help can be very satisfying. Volunteer work can take many forms, such as shelving books at a library, working on a hospital ward, serving at a soup kitchen or putting in time on a political campaign. Think about the issues you are most passionate about, and then see if there is a way to volunteer or work for pay in those areas. Knowing that you are making a difference with the places or people or ideas that mean the most to you can bring you much fulfillment and reduce your stress.

nurturing your faith or spiritual life



There is a strong connection between being spiritual and experiencing a reduction in stress.²² Spirituality does not need to be connected to a particular religion, belief system or type of worship, although it can be. Spirituality develops from your connection to others in the world and your individual search for purpose and meaning in life.²³ While spirituality has different meanings to different people, there is no question that research has shown that people who are more spiritual or religious enjoy greater benefits to their health and well-being.

In particular, participation in a spiritual or religious activity tends to relieve stress. One study showed that people with more internal religious orientation (that is, they were more dedicated to God or a higher power) had less reactivity to stress than people who were outwardly motivated regarding religion (that is, those who were interested in religion for meeting people or forming community).²⁴ Thus, prayer and an internal

spiritual life bring with them important benefits, including these:²⁵

- Better health.
- Less stress and greater ability to handle stress.
- More positive feeling and less depression.
- Greater psychological well-being.

HOW CAN YOU DEVELOP AND NURTURE YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE (OTHER THAN THE COMMON RELIGIOUS PRACTICE OF GOING TO A PLACE OF WORSHIP AND PERFORMING RELIGIOUS RITUALS)?²⁶

- Pray.
- Relax or meditate.
- Write in a journal.
- Read spiritual material.
- Nurture the relationships you have with people, particularly other spiritual people.
- Volunteer in activities that help your community or religious institution.

carve out time for recreation

No matter what ages your children are, it is important for you as a parent to find time for recreational activities. Engaging in recreation allows you to relax and recharge so that when you return to the job of parenting your children, you are refreshed and positive. As one guide on how to cope with stress says, "Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury."²⁷

HERE IS A LIST OF HOBBIES AND STRESS RELIEVERS YOU CAN EXPLORE:²

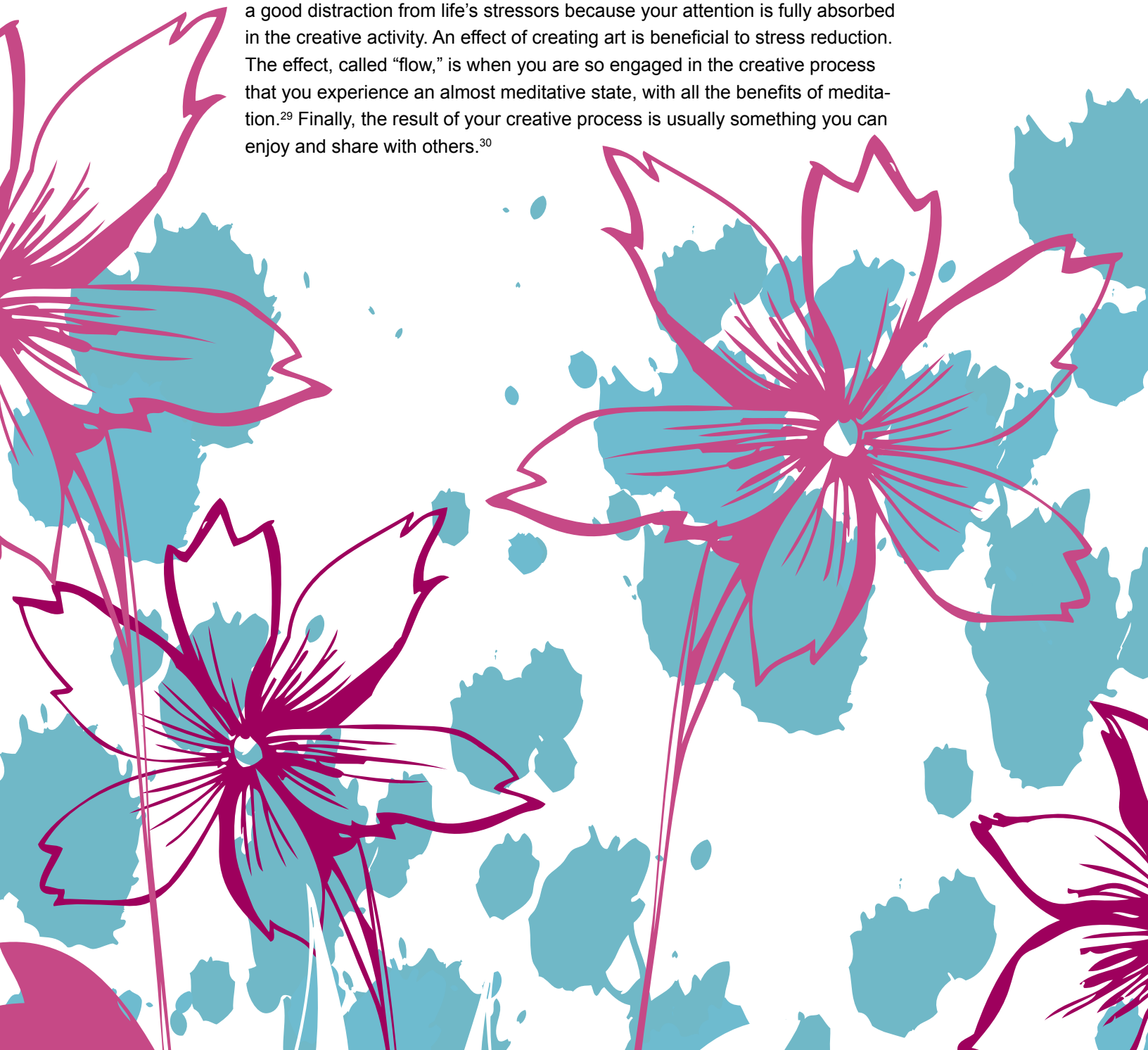
- Gardening.
- Photography.
- Walking.
- Spending time in nature.
- Taking a long bath.
- Getting a massage.
- Doing puzzles.
- Scrapbooking.
- Knitting.
- Reading.
- Listening to music.
- Going to the movies.
- Traveling.
- Playing in a local sports league.
- Cooking something fun.



engage in creative expression

In addition to finding hobbies that you enjoy or doing work that is meaningful to you, you can spend time engaged in creative expression. Examples of creative activities you could do are keeping a journal, painting, drawing, playing an instrument, writing music, or writing poetry. These are activities you can do on your own or with other people.

Getting in touch with your artistic side has many benefits. First, it serves as a good distraction from life's stressors because your attention is fully absorbed in the creative activity. An effect of creating art is beneficial to stress reduction. The effect, called "flow," is when you are so engaged in the creative process that you experience an almost meditative state, with all the benefits of meditation.²⁹ Finally, the result of your creative process is usually something you can enjoy and share with others.³⁰



pets and pet therapy

ANIMALS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN DECREASING STRESS FOR MANY PEOPLE.

Animals have a long history of use as healing companions, particularly with people who have psychiatric disabilities. The presence of therapy animals has proved so beneficial to both adults and children with psychiatric disabilities that these pets are now used in many settings, such as schools, prisons, hospitals, hospices and outpatient environments.³¹

Animal-assisted therapy (otherwise known as pet therapy) uses trained animals to help people achieve specific social, emotional and physical goals. Having a pet or visiting with a therapy animal has been shown to lower blood pressure and often improve survival rates for people who have had heart attacks. Some studies say that endorphins (pain-reducing chemicals in the body) are released when a person pets an animal. In addition, pets are

often used for rehabilitation to improve fine or gross motor skills and communication. Thus, pet therapy can be of great benefit in providing comfort and in encouraging recovery.³²

You do not need to engage in pet therapy to enjoy the benefits of having an animal as a companion. As long as you are willing to commit to caring for an animal, having a pet can be a great source of comfort to you and your family. If you live in an apartment or rental property, dogs and cats might be prohibited, but you might still enjoy having smaller pets, such as birds, rabbits or guinea pigs. As a person with a psychiatric disability, you might especially appreciate caring for an animal because it might distract you from your stress, depression and anxiety. The affection that you develop for your pet has many psychological benefits that will help you on your road to recovery. Your children might also get a lot of love and joy from the right type of pet.



relaxation techniques

RELAXING PHYSICALLY WHEN YOU ARE FEELING STRESSED WILL HELP YOUR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING.

While it might sound difficult to relax your body during times of stress, the more you practice relaxation techniques, the easier they will become. These relaxation techniques have been proved to decrease stress symptoms and improve quality of life.³³ Learning relaxation techniques is typically easy. There is little to no cost, and there are relatively few risks involved.³⁴

Listed below are some of the benefits to engaging in relaxation exercises.³⁵

- Slowing your heart rate and lowering your blood pressure.
- Slowing your breathing rate.
- Increasing your self-awareness and concentration.
- Reducing negative emotions, such as anger and frustration.
- Focusing on what is happening in the moment.

TYPES OF RELAXATION EXERCISES:

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION — This relaxation technique involves slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group, starting with the toes and feet and working up to the neck and head. It is designed to help you focus on the difference between tension and relaxation.³⁶

VISUALIZATION AND GUIDED IMAGERY — This relaxation technique has you form mental images that are relaxing. In the visualization, you would try to use as many senses as you could to make the imagery feel as real as possible. For example, you might imagine being at the seashore, hearing the sound of the waves, smelling the salty air, and feeling the warmth of the sand between your toes. Visualization is an imagery technique that you do by yourself, and guided imagery is led by someone familiar with the technique.³⁷

AUTOGENIC RELAXATION — Autogenic relaxation involves using imagery and muscle relaxation. One way to do this is to repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax. You might imagine a peaceful place while thinking in a controlled way about relaxing parts of your body and slowing your breathing.³⁸

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION — People have been practicing mindfulness meditation for thousands of years. While it has mystical and sacred roots, many people today use the technique as a tool for stress management. That is because it can produce a deep state of relaxation and a greater ability to focus the mind on an experience in the present. The practice of meditation involves focusing your attention on an object, an image, a sensation, a mantra (a calming word, thought or phrase) or your breathing while noticing where your mind goes and bringing it back to your current focus. The goal is to try to observe and describe your thoughts, feelings and sensations without judgment. Mindful breathing should be even and deep with the intention of slowing your breathing and using the diaphragm muscles more efficiently.³⁹ Also, mindfulness meditation can be as formal or as informal as you want to make it. You can go to classes or centers with trained instructors, or you can practice mindfulness meditation while walking, listening to music or praying.

positive self-talk

WHAT IS POSITIVE SELF-TALK? It is just as it sounds — talking to yourself or thinking in a positive way. Research has shown that people's thinking powerfully affects their feelings and their stress levels.⁴⁰ Thus, people who are able to challenge their negative thinking and create positive statements about themselves or things that are happening in their lives are more likely to decrease their stress.

Patterns of self-talk, whether positive or negative, often begin in childhood.⁴¹ The first step in changing any of your negative thinking to positive thinking is to identify your patterns of thinking as they relate to yourself or events going on in your life. For instance, if an activity triggers anger or anxiety, make a note of it. Also, note positive experiences.⁴² One way to do this is to jot both positive and negative thoughts down in a journal.

Once you have begun to identify your negative thoughts, you can engage in a method called thought stopping, in which you stop your negative thought mid-stream by saying “STOP” to yourself, either silently or aloud. Another way to change your negative thinking is to replace your negative dialogue with milder wording or with positive thoughts. You can also change negative statements such as “I can't handle this!” into questions such as “How can I handle this?”⁴³ Here are some additional tips for changing negative statements to positive self-talk:⁴⁴

- Focus on the shades of gray rather than think in black and white.
- Instead of dwelling on the negative, remember positive things.
- Allow for the possibility of a good outcome rather than assume the worst

will happen.

- Open yourself to the idea that people will like you and that things will go well.
- Think with logic and look at the facts rather than think with your emotions.
- Rather than focus on what “should” happen, accept that things might or might not be how you hoped or expected.
- Write down irrational thoughts that are self-defeating, and practice changing them to helpful self-talk.
- Be patient with yourself because positive self-talk takes time to master.



practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is “the practice of becoming more fully aware of the present moment — non-judgmentally and completely — rather than dwelling in the past or projecting into the fu-

ture.”⁴⁵ The focus of mindfulness is the here and now. Meditation is often seen as an avenue to pursuing mindfulness because during meditation, you are centered on your breathing or on the sensations in your body (the here and now). But you can also achieve mindfulness in daily living by simply keeping your mind on the present moment and quieting your inner self-talk.⁴⁶ You can do this when you are gardening, listening to music, writing in a journal or even cleaning.⁴⁷

Mindfulness has been shown to be incredibly helpful in stress reduction. In fact, combining mindfulness with cognitive therapy techniques has led to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, a therapy program that has been helpful in dealing with anxiety, depression and stress management. It is helpful because when you are mindful, you are less likely to think over things that cause stress or dwell on anxieties about the future. Instead, you just notice your worries and bring your attention back to your present focus.⁴⁸

A RECENT ARTICLE IN PSYCHOLOGY TODAY OUTLINES SOME WAYS TO LIVE IN THE MOMENT.⁴⁹

- Meditate as much as possible.
- Wear a reminder (such as a rubber band around your wrist), and when you notice it, let it remind you to focus on the present.
- Practice slowing down by noticing the subtle aspects of your experiences.
- Make things new. If you are doing something you have done before, switch it up in small ways.
- When you end up having to wait for something, such as waiting in line or waiting in traffic, rather than get annoyed, use that time to focus on the present.
- Focus on your senses: What is the scent? What are you seeing or hearing?

conclusion

In this module, we have discussed a variety of ways to maintain your emotional health and well-being. Gradually weaving these kinds of activities into your life, whether you choose meditating, keeping a journal, doing yoga or getting a pet, should make an enormous difference in your stress level. However, remember that you don't want to stress yourself as you are trying to relieve stress! Pick one or two stress-relieving strategies we discussed to integrate into your schedule rather than overwhelm yourself trying to do too much at once. If you are already using stress-reduction strategies that work for you, then you know how important they can be for your wellness.

The better you manage your stress, the healthier you will be for yourself, your family and your children. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you likely face many challenges with the interaction of your psychiatric disability and stress. Engaging in these stress-relieving activities is especially important for you so you can parent well and live a healthy life.

homework

List three recreational activities you engage in for yourself.

List three activities you do with your family to spend quality family time together.

Who are all of the people you can think of in your social support network?

Name one new stress-reduction technique that you have learned from this module and that you will try. Examples might be:

Practicing mindfulness

Positive self-talk

Taking time for yourself

Joining a support group

endnotes

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stress reduction

PARENTING TECHNIQUES—AGES 4-9

1. How Does Proactive Parenting Reduce Stress?
2. Creating Routines and Schedules
3. Household Responsibilities
4. Time for Bed: What to Do about Nightmares?
5. How Do I Handle Sibling Issues?
6. What is Respite Care and Why Do I Need It?
7. How Does Consistent Discipline of My Child Reduce Stress?
8. Mental Health of Your Child
9. Conclusion
10. Homework

Kundra, L., & Kaplan, K. (2012). *Session three – Stress reduction: Parenting techniques ages four to nine*. A study of Internet parenting education and social support for mothers with a psychiatric disability. Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities, Philadelphia, PA. Available at www.tucollaborative.org.

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how does proactive parenting reduce stress?

RAISING CHILDREN CAN BE STRESSFUL FOR EVERY PARENT, NOT ONLY PARENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES.

To be a good parent, you need to be continually attentive to the changing

needs and wants of your child. This can be difficult, especially when you are trying to manage your household, engage in a relationship with your partner and possibly hold down a job at the same time. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may feel even more stress because, in addition to bringing up your kids and dealing with household challenges, you need to work at managing your symptoms.

One way to reduce this stress is to proactively parent. Proactive parenting involves actively taking charge of caring for your children by creating routines for them and organizing your time. For example, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the demands of your children, household, partner and job. A proactive approach to this problem is, for example, to create a written daily schedule for yourself and for your child/children. This schedule can break down all of the tasks that you need to do in a manageable way and it can help you see what your children need over the course of the day. This kind of planning can make you a better parent, and will help to reduce your stress.

On the following pages, we will examine some of the areas of concern to parents of children ages 4 to 9, and we will provide some tips for how to deal with stressful situations that may occur when parenting a young child. Some of these tips will be directly related to reducing your stress while others may be more general.



creating routines and schedules

When your child was an infant, you may have tried to have him follow a sleeping and/or a feeding schedule. At the very least, your doctor may have recommended creating routines around bedtime and mealtime. This is because following a schedule or routine helps both you and your child. If your child knows what to expect and can plan for it, this decreases the stress that he may experience during times of transition. If your child is experiencing less stress, you will as well.

For example, at bedtime, you can create a routine like this:¹

- Put away toys in room
- Take a bath
- Put on pajamas
- Brush teeth and go to the bathroom
- Get a drink of water
- Pick out a stuffed animal
- Read a story together
- Turn on bedtime music
- Lights out

By following this schedule every night, your child should begin to feel secure in transitioning to bedtime. Instead of crying when bedtime comes or trying to come up with ways to stay up longer, your child will have a clear understanding of his expected behavior. This will lower both your stress and his stress and make bedtime an easier transition.



household responsibilities

When your child is between age 4 and age 9, it is time for her to start to share in the household responsibilities, albeit in a small way. Even as young as age 2, children can start to learn to put their toys away. By age 9, your child should be able to set and clear the table, take care of the family pet, and make his bed in the morning. Having your children do these kinds of household chores is important: it helps them feel like a part of the family and increases their feelings of competency and self worth.² This will ultimately lead to less stress for you.

Household chores at ages 4 to 6 (with some assistance):³

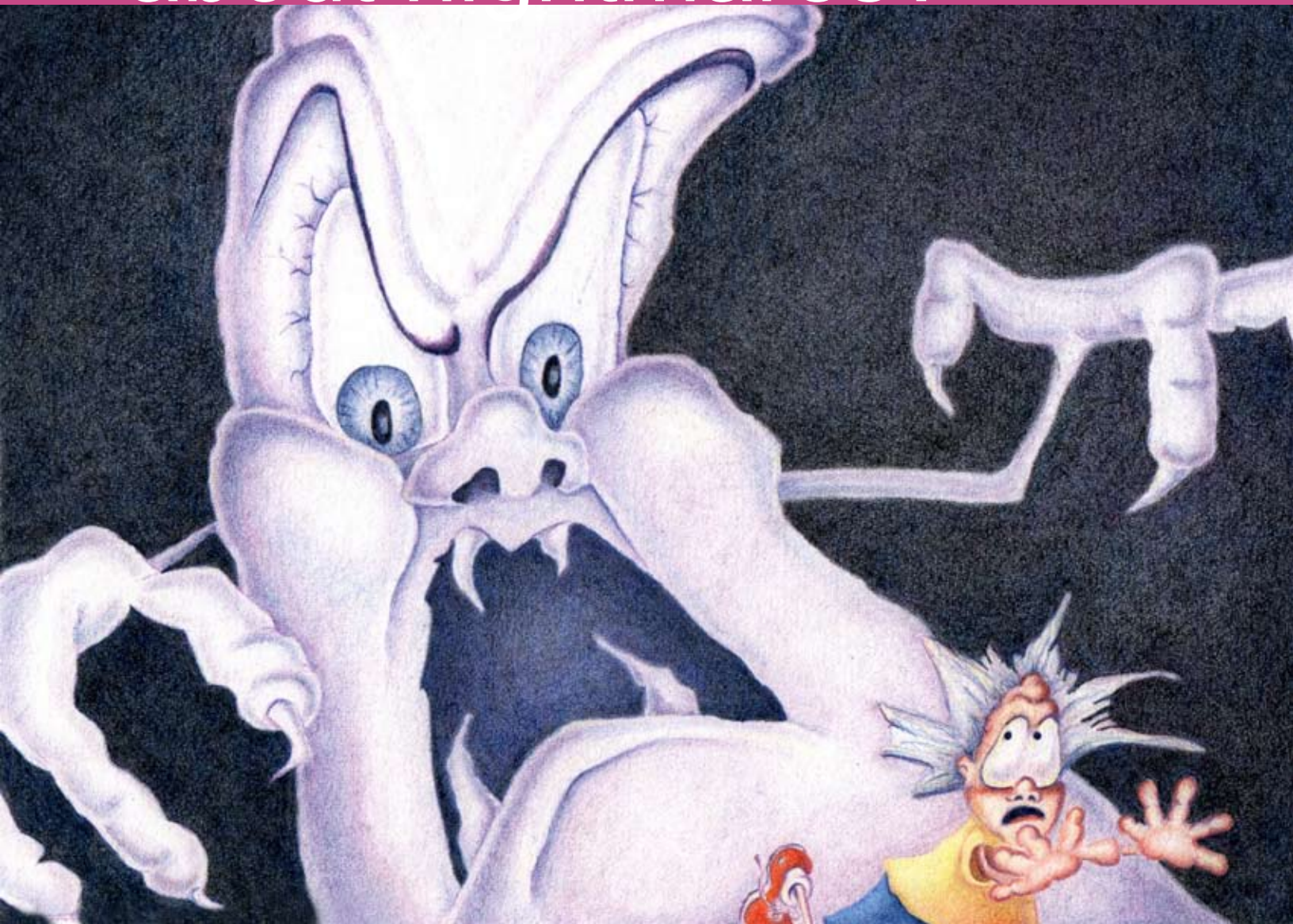
- Putting toys away
- Helping to make bed
- Cleaning up room
- Putting dirty laundry in hamper
- Putting clean clothes in dresser

Household chores at ages 7 to 9 (with some assistance at age 7):⁴

- Setting the table
- Clearing the table
- Making bed and cleaning room
- Cleaning the sink in the bathroom
- Feeding the family pet
- Sorting and folding laundry
- Sweeping and dusting
- Helping to prepare lunches for school



time for bed: what to do about nightmares?

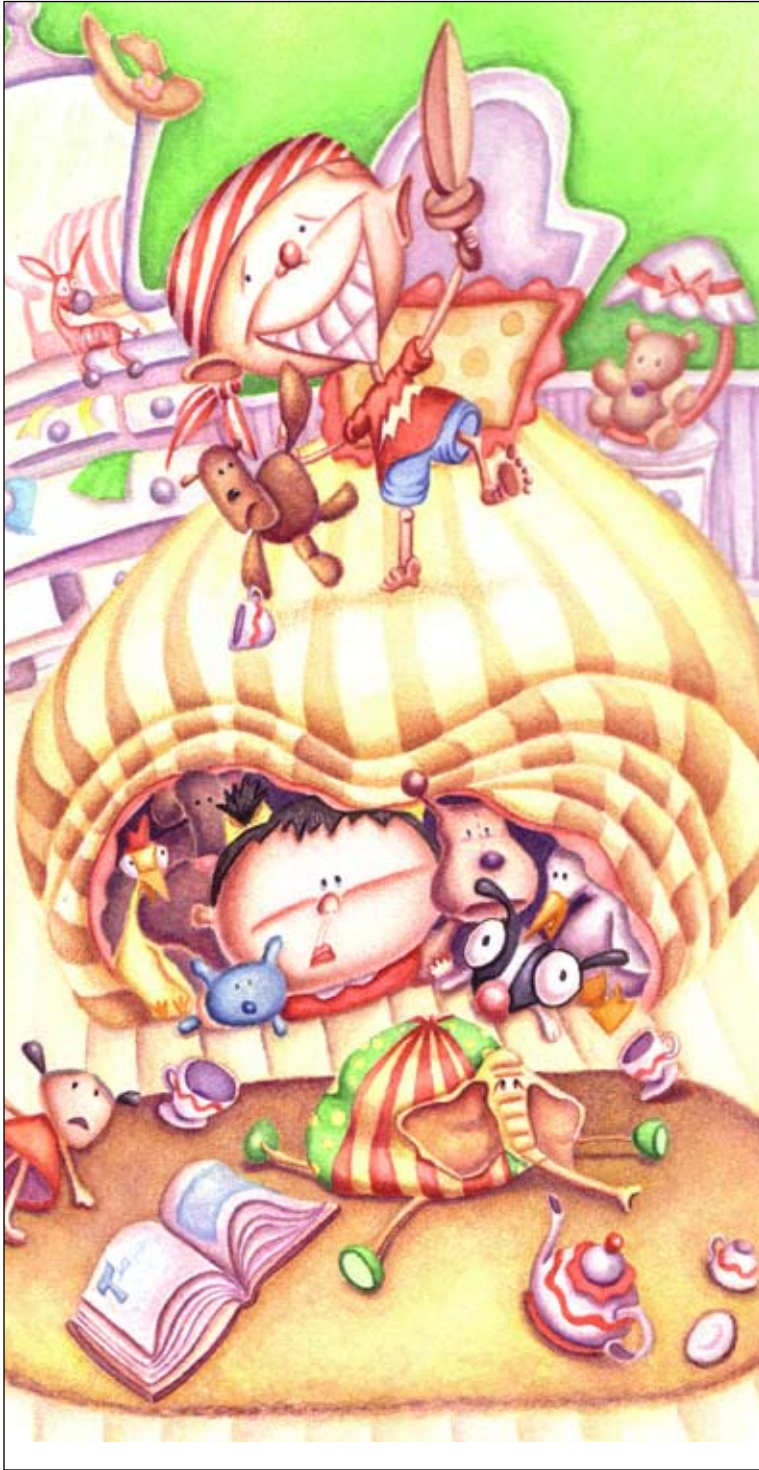


When your child is in pre-school or grade school, having a bedtime routine decreases stress. Particularly if your child is having a hard time falling asleep or is waking up with nightmares, a bedtime schedule will help soothe him.⁵ One other tip is to have your child get to sleep earlier rather than later; she will be less tired and cranky at bedtime and this routine will go more smoothly.⁶

This is also a common age for nightmares and night terrors to occur. We are all susceptible to

having nightmares. Night terrors start around pre-school age, but most people outgrow them. Your child may be screaming, thrashing, crying, and even appear awake, but will in the end return to sleep quickly and usually have no memory of the episode. The best thing to do in this situation is to keep the lights low and speak to your child in a soothing voice. Usually after 10 to 30 minutes, your child will return to sleep. While this can be upsetting for you, remember that these episodes are common for children of this age.⁷

how do i handle sibling issues?



HAVING BROTHERS AND SISTERS CAN BE BOTH A BLESSING AND A STRUGGLE.

Some siblings adore each other and become life-long friends. Others may find it difficult to have to spend large quantities of time with a brother or sister who is very different from themselves. Inevitably, siblings will compete with each other for their parents' attention to some degree.⁸

What can you do to ease this competition and encourage good sibling relationships?⁹

Help your child prepare for a new baby ahead of time. Read your child books about being a big brother or sister, and spend time together with other people's babies. Once the baby is born, carve out some special time to be alone with your older child. Never blame the baby if you can't do something with your older child.

Don't try to treat each child equally. Think about what is appropriate for each child given their age and level of development, and be fair when doing things with them.

Avoid comparing your kids to each other.

Remind your children of their family bond. For example, say, "Give your brother back his toy" instead of "Give Sam back his toy."

It is often a good idea to let your children sort out their problems on their own.

Don't force friendships between your children: some children get along great, others less so. But remind your children that they must always treat each other with respect.

Encourage patience in your younger child if your older one is being bossy, and in your older child if your younger one is tagging along too much.

Keep their toys separate as much as possible. If they get into a squabble over a toy, make a rule like: the kid who touched the toy first gets it for another 5 minutes. Set a timer if you need to.

The more that you can decrease competition between your children, the easier it will be for them to get along and the less stressful your environment will be.

what is respite care and why do i need it?

RESPITE CARE IS CHILD CARE THAT GIVES YOU A EITHER A SHORT OR A LONG BREAK FROM CARING FOR YOUR CHILD.

Respite care allows parents to de-stress, recharge, and come back to their children refreshed and excited about parenting.

Parents with psychiatric disabilities can especially benefit from respite care.

There are times when your symptoms may get in the way of your ability to focus on caring for your child/children.

Respite care will give you the time that you need to decrease your stress level, deal with your symptoms and seek help or support if you need it.

There are many different types of respite care. It can be as simple as asking a friend or relative to watch your child, or it can involve taking your child to a respite or child care center. If you are going to use a respite or child care center, you will need to fill out paperwork and your child's pediatrician may also need to fill out some forms. Additionally, you should ask for some references about the agency and interview some of the staff.



how does consistent discipline of my child reduce stress?



Disciplining your child is one of the most important things you can do to help her mature. Appropriate discipline teaches responsibility, protects your child from dangerous situations, and demonstrates socially acceptable ways to behave. It may take energy and effort to discipline consistently, but it is worth it. When your child is responsible, safe and behaves well, both of you will experience less stress.

Disciplining children is a controversial topic. There is no one right way to discipline a child. Every child is unique and responds to different methods of discipline in his or her own way. What works for one child may not work for another, even when they are siblings.¹⁰

Some tips for disciplining your child are:¹¹

Find a balanced approach to discipline, where misbehavior is punished but good behavior is continually positively reinforced.

Explain the rules to your child clearly, describe the consequences of not following the rules and then be consistent about discipline if your child breaks the rules.

Make sure that the punishment matches the negative behavior; never give a harsh punishment for a minor offense.

Time the punishment so that it happens immediately after the negative behavior, or as soon afterward as possible.

Be careful that you do not inadvertently reinforce negative behavior. For example, let's say that your pre-schooler throws a tantrum in the store because you are not buying him something that he wants. Buying the item so that your child stops his tantrum reinforces your child's negative behavior.

Be a strong role model. One of the most important ways your child will learn how to behave is by watching you.



mental health of your child

As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may be concerned that your child may also show signs of a psychiatric disability. While your child may have a greater chance of developing a psychiatric disability because of his genetic inheritance, genetics are only one factor.¹² Keeping your child's environment emotionally healthy and working at building his self-esteem will reduce his stress, which, in turn, will reduce your stress.

An emotionally healthy environment that builds self-esteem is one where...

- Kids are praised and encouraged.
- Kids are listened to and respected.
- Kids feel safe, secure and loved unconditionally.
- Kids are given guidance and discipline when necessary.¹³



conclusion

One of the best ways to decrease your stress as a parent is to proactively address parenting issues with your children. Following routines and schedules, sharing in household chores, and having bedtime rituals can be extremely helpful for 4- to 9-year-olds. Promoting the mental health of your child is also important. Anything that you can do ahead of time to ease transitions for your children or help them through difficult situations will reduce stress and will result in better emotional health for you and your family.



homework

1. What does proactive parenting mean to you?
2. What are some things you can do to promote the emotional well-being of your child?
3. What are some household responsibilities that you child already has?
4. Does your 4 to 9 year old child have a sibling and if so, what can you do to promote a positive relationship between your children?

endnotes

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stress reduction

PARENTING TECHNIQUES—AGES 10-13

1. How Does Proactive Parenting Reduce Stress?
2. Creating Routines and Schedules
3. Household Responsibilities
4. Spending Time With Your Child
5. How Do I Handle Sibling Issues?
6. Do I Still Need Respite Care?
7. How Does Consistent Discipline of My Child Reduce Stress?
8. Mental Health of Your child
9. Conclusion
10. Homework

Kundra, L., & Kaplan, K. (2012). *Session three – Stress reduction: Parenting techniques ages ten to thirteen*. A study of Internet parenting education and social support for mothers with a psychiatric disability. Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities, Philadelphia, PA. Available at www.tucollaborative.org.

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how does proactive parenting reduce stress?

RAISING CHILDREN IS STRESSFUL FOR EVERY PARENT, NOT ONLY PARENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES. To be a good parent, you need

to be continually attentive to the changing needs and wants of your child. This can be difficult, especially when you are trying to manage your household, engage in a relationship with your partner and possibly hold down a job at the same time. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may feel even more stress because, in addition to bringing up your kids and dealing with household challenges, you need to work at managing your symptoms.

One way to reduce this stress is to proactively parent. Proactive parenting involves actively taking charge of caring for your children by creating routines for them and organizing your time. For example, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the demands of your children, household, partner and job. A proactive approach to this problem is, for example, to create a written daily schedule for yourself and for your child/children. This schedule can break down all of the tasks that you need to do in a manageable way and it can help you see what your children need over the course of the day. This kind of planning can make you a better parent, and will help to reduce your stress.

On the following pages, we will examine some of the areas of concern to parents of children ages 10-13 and we will provide some tips for how to deal with stressful situations that may occur when parenting a “tween.” Some of these tips will be directly related to reducing your stress while others may be more general.



creating routines and schedules

When your child was younger, you may have tried to have him follow a sleeping and/or a feeding schedule. At the very least, your doctor may have recommended creating routines around bedtime and mealtime. This is because following a schedule or routine helps both you and your child. Knowing what to expect and planning for it lowers the stress that your child may go through during times of the day that involve transition. If your child is experiencing less stress, so will you.

Children ages 10 to 13 may be involved in a number of activities or sports teams after school. One way to create a schedule for them is to list what your child is doing every day after school and fit homework, family meetings and family dinners into that schedule. An example of a schedule for an 11-year-old might be:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| • 7:00 a.m.—3:30 p.m. | School |
| • 3:30 p.m.—4:30 p.m. | Come home from school and relax, downtime |
| • 4:30 p.m.—5:00 p.m. | Practice the piano |
| • 5:00 p.m.—6:15 p.m. | Soccer practice |
| • 6:15 p.m.—7:00 p.m. | Family Dinner |
| • 7:00 p.m.—8:30 p.m. | Homework |
| • 8:30 p.m.—9:00 p.m. | Family meeting*/family time |
| • 9:00 p.m.—9:30 p.m. | Get ready and go to bed |

*A family meeting is an opportunity for families to get together to discuss issues that pertain to the family.¹



household responsibilities

As your children get older, they can participate more in taking care of the family home. Having your children do different kinds of household chores is important; it not only helps you in a very real way, but it contributes to their feeling like a part of the family, increases their feelings of competency and self-worth, and allows them to grow into responsible adults. All of this translates into less stress for you.

Household chores that are age-appropriate for children from 10 to 13 (your child should do some of these, not all of these):²

- **Setting and clearing the table**
- **Making the bed and cleaning the bedroom**
- **Changing the sheets on the bed**
- **Cleaning the bathroom**
- **Feeding the family pet**
- **Sorting, washing/drying, folding, and putting away the laundry**
- **Sweeping and dusting**
- **Helping to prepare school lunches**
- **Helping to cook meals**
- **Taking care of younger sibling (with an adult around)**
- **Outdoor chores (helping with raking leaves or shoveling snow)**



spending time with your child

It is tremendously important for your child's development and for your relationship with your child, that you spend time together doing activities and communicating with each other.³ Children in this age range are just beginning adolescence. Not only may they have questions about the physical changes that are occurring to their bodies, but they may also have a lot of concerns that are more emotional or social in nature.⁴ Spending time with your child will

give him the opportunity to express these concerns and ask questions in a safe and healthy way. In addition, spending time together is a way of nurturing your relationship and increasing communication. The more positive experiences you and your children have together, the less stress you and your children will feel.

SOME ACTIVITIES THAT YOU CAN DO WITH YOUR CHILD AGES 10 TO 13:

- Take a walk in the neighborhood
- Go on a bike ride
- Read together
- Watch a movie together
- Do a computer activity together
- Take your child for a special treat (like an ice cream cone)
- Cook a meal together



how do i handle sibling issues?

Having brothers and sisters can be both a blessing and a struggle all at once. Some siblings adore each other and become life-long friends. Others may find it difficult to have to spend large quantities of time with a brother or sister who is very different from themselves. Inevitably, siblings will compete with each other for their parents' attention to some degree.⁵

What can you do to ease this competition and encourage good sibling relationships?⁶

- Don't try to treat each child equally. Think about what is appropriate for each child given their age and level of development.
- Avoid comparing your kids to each other.
- Remind your children of their family bond. For example, say "Help your brother set the table" as opposed to "Help Sam set the table."
- It is often a good idea to let your children sort their problems out on their own.
- Don't force friendships between your children: some children get along great, others less so. But remind your children that they must always treat each other with respect.
- Encourage patience in your younger child if your older one is being bossy, and in your older child if your younger one is tagging along too much.
- Encourage family cohesion. Do activities together as a family and have family meetings.⁷

The more that you can decrease competition between your children, the easier it will be for them to get along, and the less stressful your environment will be.



do i still need respite care?

RESPIRE CARE IS ANY KIND OF CHILD CARE THAT A PARENT USES WHEN THEY ARE AT WORK OR WHEN THEY JUST NEED A BREAK FROM CARING FOR THEIR CHILDREN. All parents need some time

away from caring for their children so that they can de-stress, re-charge, and come back refreshed and excited

about parenting. Parents with psychiatric disabilities can especially benefit from respite care. There are times when your symptoms may get in the way of your being able to focus on caring for your child/children. Respite care will give you the time that you need to decrease your stress level, deal with your symptoms and seek help or support if you need it.

Do you still need respite care when your children are ages 10 to 13? Most child development experts agree that starting around age 11 or 12, children can be left alone during the day for short periods of time.⁸ You should use this as a guide. If your child is 11 or 12 and you need a short break and you will be close by, it is most likely safe to leave her for a brief period. If you are going further away, will be gone longer, or if there are younger siblings involved, you may still need respite care. This can be in the form of a friend or relative watching your child or it can be at a respite or child care agency.



how does consistent discipline of my child reduce stress?



Disciplining your child is one of the most important things you can do to help her mature. Appropriate discipline teaches responsibility, protects your child from dangerous situations, and demonstrates socially acceptable ways to behave. When your child is responsible, safe and behaves well, you will experience less stress.

Disciplining children is a controversial topic. There is no one right way to discipline a child. Every child is unique and responds to different methods of discipline in his or her own way. What works for one child, may not work for another, even when children are siblings.⁹

Some tips for disciplining your child are:¹⁰

- Find a balanced approach to discipline, where misbehavior is punished, and good behavior is continually positively reinforced.
- Explain the rules to your child clearly, describe the consequences of not following the rules and then be consistent about discipline if your child breaks the rules.
- Make sure that the punishment matches the negative behavior; never give a harsh punishment for a minor offense.
- Time the punishment so that it happens immediately after the negative behavior, or as soon afterward as possible.
- Be careful that you do not inadvertently reinforce negative behavior.
- Be a strong role model. One of the most important ways your child will learn how to behave is by watching you.



mental health of your child

AS A PARENT WITH A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY, YOU MAY BE CONCERNED THAT YOUR CHILD MAY ALSO SHOW SIGNS OF A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY.

While your child may have a greater chance of developing a psychiatric disability because of his genetic inheritance, remember that genetics are only one factor.¹¹ Keeping your child's environment emotionally healthy and working at building his self-esteem will reduce his stress, which will in turn reduce your stress.

An emotionally healthy environment that builds self-esteem is one where...

- **Kids are praised and encouraged.**
- **Kids are listened to and respected.**
- **Kids feel safe, secure and loved unconditionally.**
- **Kids are given guidance and discipline when necessary.¹²**



conclusion



One of the best ways to decrease your stress is to proactively address parenting issues with your children. Following routines and schedules for activities and homework, sharing in household chores, preparing nutritious meals and exercising together can be extremely helpful. Promoting the physical and mental health of your child and beginning to respect his privacy needs are also important. Anything that you can do ahead of time to ease transitions for your children or help them through difficult situations will reduce stress and will result in better emotional health for you and your family.

homework

1. What does proactive parenting mean to you?
2. What are some things you can do to promote the physical and emotional well-being of your child?
3. What does an emotionally healthy home environment look like to you?
4. What are some activities that you can do with your child?

endnotes

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stress reduction



PARENTING TECHNIQUES—AGES 14-18

- 1. How Does Proactive Parenting Reduce Stress?**
- 2. Routines and Creating Family Time with Your Teenager**
- 3. Household Responsibilities**
- 4. How Do I Communicate with My Teenager?**
- 5. Mental Health of Your Teenager**
- 6. Peer Pressure**
- 7. Teen Sexuality**
- 8. Conclusion**
- 9. Homework**

how does proactive parenting reduce stress?

RAISING CHILDREN IS STRESSFUL FOR EVERY PARENT, NOT ONLY PARENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES. To be a good parent, you need to be continually attentive to the changing needs and wants of your child. This can be difficult

especially when you are trying to manage your household, engage in a relationship with your partner and possibly hold down a job at the same time. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may feel even more stress because, in addition to bringing up your kids and dealing with household challenges, you need to work at managing your symptoms.

One way to reduce this stress is to proactively parent. Proactive parenting involves actively taking charge of caring for your children by creating routines for them and organizing your time. For example, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the demands of your children, household, partner and job. A proactive approach to this problem is, for example, to create a written daily schedule for yourself and for your child/children. This schedule can break down all of the tasks that you need to do in a manageable way and it can help you see what your children need over the course of the day. This kind of planning can make you a better parent, and will help to reduce your stress.

On the following pages, we will examine some of the areas of concern to parents of children ages 14 to 18 and we will provide some tips for how to deal with stressful situations that may occur when parenting an adolescent. Some of these tips will be directly related to reducing your stress while others may be more general.



routines and creating family time with your teenager

When your child was very young, you may have tried to have him follow a sleeping and/or a feeding schedule. At the very least, your doctor may have recommended creating routines around bedtime and mealtime. This is because following a schedule or routine helps both you and your child. Knowing what to expect and planning for it lowers the stress that your child may go through during times of the day that involve transition. If your child is experiencing less stress, so will you.

While adolescents do not need to follow the same sorts of elaborate mealtime and bedtime routines that younger children do, it is important that your teenager have a basic routine to be able to manage his activities and school work. Most experts agree that teenagers

need about 9 hours of sleep a night, though often they don't get it.¹ The more you can do to help your teenager organize the tasks that he has to accomplish in order to get sufficient sleep, the less stress you and your child will experience.

Remember to schedule family time, for example, doing fun activities together on the weekends or having a weekly family meeting. (A family meeting is an opportunity for families to get together to discuss issues that pertain to the family.²) At this age it is perfectly normal for your child to want to spend a great deal of time with friends rather than family.³ But it is also important to have some family time. Parents should try to be available when their teen expresses interest in being together as a family and use this opportunity to communicate with him about his concerns.⁴



household responsibilities

As your children get older, they can participate more fully in taking care of the family home. It is important to have your teenager do different kinds of household chores because it not only helps you in a very real way but, it contributes to his feeling like a part of the family, increases his feelings of competency and self-worth, and allows him to grow into a responsible adult.⁵ All of this translates into less stress for you.

Examples of chores that a teenager can do are:

- **Cleaning his bedroom**
- **Cleaning the bathrooms**
- **Taking out the garbage**
- **Making meals**
- **Doing the dishes**
- **Vacuuming**

For further information, please see Child Development Ages 14 to 18 Module: Money Management.



how do i communicate with my teenager?

Communicating with your teenager involves finding a balance between talking and listening. The teenage years are a time of tremendous emotional growth and quite a bit of confusion. Your teenager will appreciate a sounding board with whom he can share his new ideas and someone to help him cope with his new experiences. Listening to your child at this stage, instead of telling him what to do or lecturing him, will contribute to a positive relationship and ultimately, less stress for you.⁶

“Listen when we need to talk to you, even if it’s something you don’t want to hear.”
(Aileen, California)⁷

Tips for Communicating With Your Teenager:⁸

Engage in Active Listening—Active listening means, first, that you need to give your child your full attention (do not answer your phone or do other tasks while listening to him). Concentrate fully on what your child is saying and, if possible, reflect his concerns back to him. Do not interject your opinion unless your child asks for it, and don’t change the subject.

Be Empathetic—Try to put yourself in your child’s shoes in order to understand how she is really feeling. One way to do this is to think about the feelings behind her words, and acknowledge those feelings. You might say, “You must be feeling really scared right now” instead of “I understand how you feel.”

Give her space, but do not give up—If your teenager does not seem to want to communicate with you, don’t force it. But try again a little later. Listen, and communicate with her about the things that she is interested in.

Communicate that you believe in her—It is normal for adolescents to have many insecurities. Your teenager will benefit from knowing that you believe in her and in what she can accomplish.



mental health of your teenager

As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may be concerned that your child may also show signs of a psychiatric disability. While your child may have a greater susceptibility to developing a psychiatric disability because of his genetic inheritance, remember that genetics are only one factor.⁹ Keeping your child's environment emotionally healthy and working at building his self-esteem will reduce his stress, and make it less likely that a genetic vulnerability (if he has one) will develop into a psychiatric disability.¹⁰ Thus, keeping your teen's environment emotionally healthy will help lower your stress level as well.

How do you provide an emotionally healthy environment for your teenager and build his self-esteem?

Teaching your child good coping skills is very important to keeping him safe and mentally healthy. Good coping skills can help prevent your child from turning to behaviors that may cause her harm, like self-injury or eating disorders.¹¹ They can help to improve her self esteem, which may keep depression or other psychiatric disabilities from developing. Good coping skills include:¹²

- **Setting goals and aiming for manageable accomplishments**
- **Trying to see mistakes as learning opportunities**
- **Recognizing what you can change and what you can't -- if something about yourself makes you unhappy, either work on changing it (if it can be changed) or accept yourself the way you are.**
- **Finding the positive in any situation**
- **Contributing to society—knowing that you are making a difference in someone else's life helps increase your own self-esteem.**
- **Exercising and eating a balanced diet**
- **Doing relaxation and breathing exercises to decrease stress**



peer pressure

All children, no matter how old they are, are affected by their peers. But as children become teenagers, changes occur. As teenagers, even though they are growing more independent, they also do not want to appear different from their peers—they want to fit in.¹³ This may lead your teen into situations where he feels pressured to do something that he is not sure that he wants to do. Obviously, this kind of situation creates stress in your household. The more positive influences you can promote between your child and his peers, the less stress you and your teen will experience.

Peer Influence Can be Positive¹⁴

- Peers can set good examples for each other—for example, doing well in school, aspiring to go to college, playing a sport or playing an instrument.
- Peers can offer feedback and advice.
- Peers can help each other try out their socialization skills.
- Peers can be encouraging and help each other get involved in new activities.

What can you do to help your teenager when peer influence is not healthy?¹⁵

- Help your teen to come up with other activities that she enjoys—for instance, instead of allowing her to go to a big party where she thinks there will be drinking, encourage her to invite small group of friends over to watch a movie.
- Help your child to role-play being assertive.
- Suggest to your teenager that true friends don't put pressure on each other and to not be afraid to lose a destructive friendship.
- Encourage your teen to stand up for what he believes in and to trust his instincts.



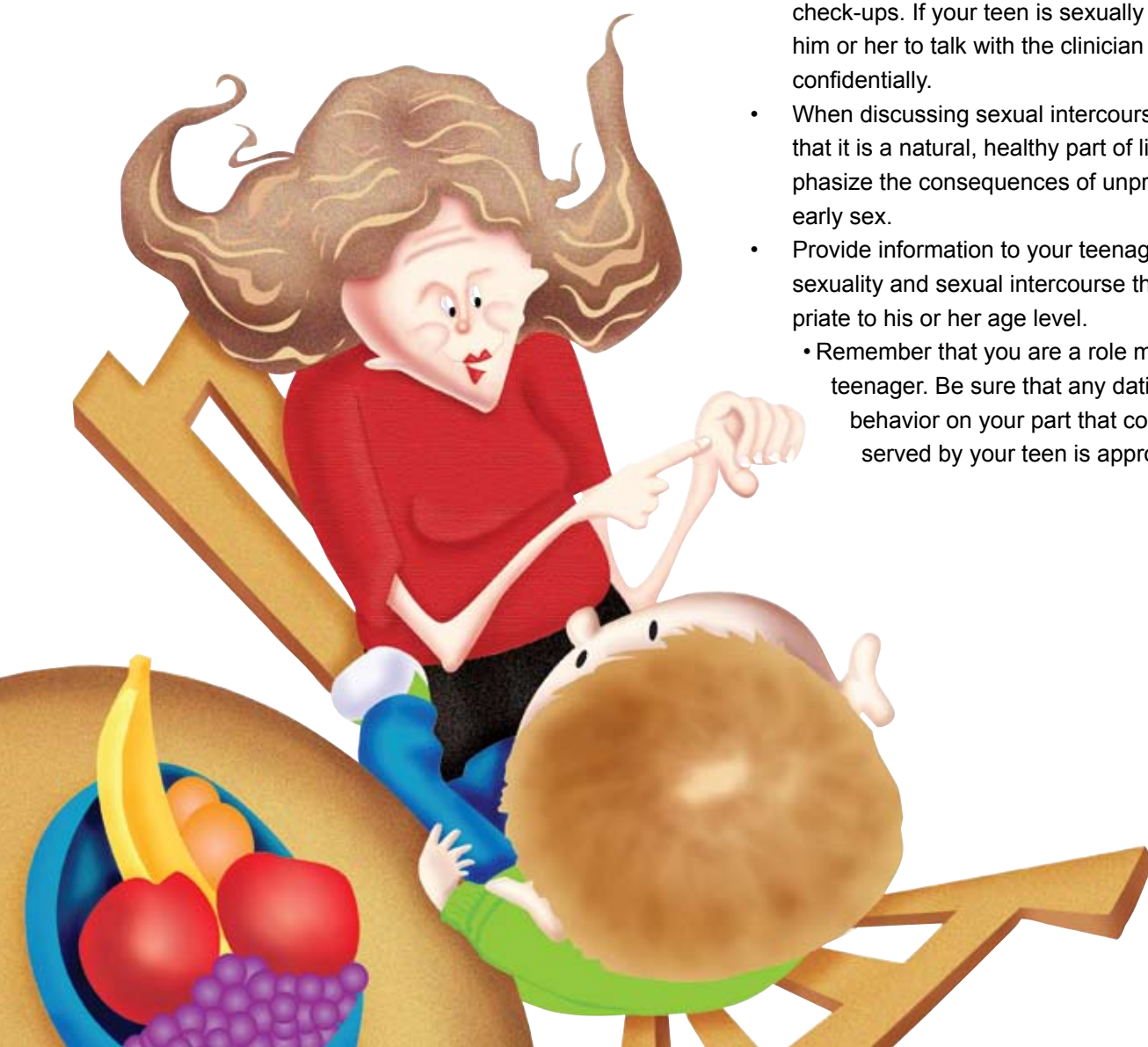
teen sexuality

During adolescence, hormones are raging and bodies are changing. As a result, sexual feelings begin to unfold. These feelings can sometimes be confusing and intense. This is often the time when a person comes to recognize their sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual) and gender identity.¹⁶ Increasingly, this is a time of sexual exploration, and often, sexual intercourse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 63% of seniors in high school have had sexual intercourse.¹⁷ With such a high percentage of teenagers being sexually active, it is imperative that parents talk with their

teenagers about sexual issues, such as contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. This may be difficult for you (and for your teenager as well) but will ultimately lead to better communication between you. This will result in less stress for the family.

How do I encourage my teenager to approach her sexuality in a healthy way?¹⁸

- Start talking about sexuality and contraception at an early age. Do not wait until late adolescence to discuss it.
- Bring your teenager to a doctor for routine check-ups. If your teen is sexually active, allow him or her to talk with the clinician privately and confidentially.
- When discussing sexual intercourse, recognize that it is a natural, healthy part of life, but emphasize the consequences of unprotected and early sex.
- Provide information to your teenager about sexuality and sexual intercourse that is appropriate to his or her age level.
 - Remember that you are a role model for your teenager. Be sure that any dating or sexual behavior on your part that could be observed by your teen is appropriate.



conclusion



One of the best ways to decrease your stress is to proactively address parenting issues with your children. As a parent of a 14- to 18-year-old, creating family time and routines for activities and homework, make sure that your teen participates in household responsibilities, preparing nutritious meals and promoting exercise can be extremely helpful. During the teen years, privacy needs become paramount, peers have greater influence and sexuality is explored. Anything that you can do ahead of time to ease these significant transitions for your teenagers or help them through difficult situations will reduce stress and result in better emotional health for you and your family.

homework

1. What does proactive parenting mean to you?

2. What does an emotionally healthy home environment look like to you?

3. What are some ways you can keep your teenager safe?

5. What are some things you can do to increase and improve your communication with your teenager?

endnotes

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stress reduction

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

1. Introduction
2. Nutrition and Diet
3. Exercise
4. Sleep
5. Choosing a Primary Care Provider
6. Getting Regular Physical Health Check-Ups
7. Medication
8. Dental Care
9. Alcohol and Illegal Drugs
10. Tobacco Use
11. Disease Prevention
12. Conclusion
13. Homework

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introduction

As a parent, you can be guaranteed a certain amount of stress. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you experience even greater stress sometimes. This is because you must deal with managing your psychiatric disability while you are parenting. You might have to juggle child care so you can attend to treatment or manage the symptoms of your psychiatric disability, such as feeling low energy or hearing voices, while being responsive to your children's needs.

It is imperative that you take care of yourself both physically and emotionally so you can reduce the amount of stress in your life and ultimately be a better parent. While it may sometimes be a challenge to focus on physical health when dealing with a psychiatric disability, it is very important to do so. Taking care of your physical health can actually make your psychiatric disability easier to manage by preventing the stress of physical problems, which can contribute to episodes of your psychiatric disability. In addition, reducing stress and feeling physically well will make for a much more enjoyable parenting experience.

This module will focus on maintaining your physical health and wellness. We will discuss how good nutrition, exercise and healthy sleep habits will positively affect your physical wellness and lower your stress. Other aspects of maintaining your physical health, such as making regular doctor visits and handling medication issues, will also be discussed.



nutrition and diet

While genetics and environment are thought to play the most important roles in the development of mental health difficulties, your diet may also have an enormous impact on your emotional wellness.¹ The food you eat has an impact on your mood, your sleep habits, your energy, and the amount of stress you feel.² This is because food contains complex nutrients, such as proteins, fats and carbohydrates, in addition to vitamins and minerals. All of these nutrients affect the various chemicals in the brain.³ As one nutrition scientist noted, “The new research shows that the effect of food can be direct on the brain, and that it can be directly related to mood and behavior.”⁴

When it comes to psychiatric disabilities, research tends to focus on how the brain is affected by nutritional deficiencies.⁵ One common example is that people with psychiatric disabilities often have lower levels of the essential fatty acid omega-3. Omega-3 is often found in fish such as salmon or trout. Evidence seems to show that these fish oils prevent and treat depression much like common anti-depressant medication, by increasing serotonin levels in the brain.⁶ One study involving people diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia showed that supplementing diets with omega-3 fatty acids improved symptoms in up to 64% of patients.⁷ While more research on omega-3 fatty acids still needs to be done, eating a diet rich in omega-3 is likely to benefit you if you have a psychiatric disability.⁸

Other recommendations for healthy eating include:⁹

- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables (4 to 5 portions a day).
- Consume carbohydrates that offer greater nutritional value, such as whole grain bread, whole wheat pasta and brown rice.
- Proteins (fish, lean meat, cheese, eggs and nuts), calcium (broccoli and dairy products, such as milk) and fats (unsaturated) are all important to consume daily.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol because these substances cause the body to lose nutrients.
- Take vitamin and mineral supplements, but only after consulting with your doctor.





exercise

It is not known why exercise helps reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety, but some theories are that exercise:

- Releases neurotransmitters and endorphins (substances that affect the brain in positive ways).
- Helps provide a distraction from life's problems.
- Can improve a person's mood by increasing social interaction.
- Can increase self-esteem and confidence because body image and stamina are improved.¹⁵

So how do you start an exercise plan and stay motivated?

• The first step is to talk to your doctor and get a physical so you know the types of exercise that are safe for you.

• Next, you should decide what kind of exercise is best for you to do. Think about what you enjoy doing because those are the activities you are most likely to follow through on. Think about what time of day is best for you to exercise. Remember that there are a lot of options for activities, such as exercise classes at a gym, swimming at a local pool, gardening, using home fitness equipment, or going on walks with your children. Try different activities until you find one you enjoy.¹⁶

• Start slowly and break up exercise activities. Remember that when you begin your exercise program, you should start by exercising for shorter intervals and gradually work your way up to longer, more strenuous periods of activity. Even after you have built up some stamina, you can still break up your periods of exercise if you want to. Three 15-minute walks are just as good as one 45-minute walk.¹⁷

• Find a friend to exercise with, because exercising with other people can help you stay motivated. In addition, it reduces the social isolation you might sometimes feel.¹⁸

• Get more physical activity in small ways. Add physical activity to your everyday routine. For instance, park farther away from the store than you otherwise would, and take the stairs instead of the elevator.¹⁹

Like nutrition, exercise is an important component to staying healthy both physically and mentally. Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American College of Sports Medicine state that every adult in North America should exercise 30 minutes on most days of the week, preferably every day.¹⁰ Exercise has been proven to prevent and treat many types of physical illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and osteoporosis, and has been known to help in dealing with conditions such as menopause and nicotine abstinence.¹¹

Studies have also consistently shown that people with depression and anxiety benefit from routine exercise.¹² One study from the United Kingdom showed that 83% of people with psychiatric disabilities surveyed stated that exercise put them in a better mood and helped reduce their stress.¹³ Other studies have shown that “moderate aerobic workouts, done three to five times weekly, cut mild to moderate depression symptoms nearly in half.”¹⁴

sleep

On average, people need approximately eight hours of sleep a night. A recent poll conducted in America revealed that almost 1 in 5 people get only about six hours of sleep per night.²⁰ In order to reduce the stress you feel as a parent with a psychiatric disability, it is critical that you try to sleep at least eight hours per night as often as possible.

This poll also found that nearly 7 in 10 people experience sleep problems.²¹ Sleep problems can include:²²

- Snoring and sleep apnea — reawakening during the night because of obstructed breathing.
- Insomnia — the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep.
- Hypersomnia — sleeping too much.
- Parasomnias — for instance, sleepwalking, sleep terrors, and sleep eating.
- Sleep paralysis — during the transition from sleep to waking, the person may find that his or her body seems paralyzed.

- Circadian rhythm disorders — the natural body clock gets out of sync.
- Narcolepsy — excessive daytime sleepiness.

While the connection between mental health and sleep is not entirely clear, sleep disorders such as those listed above (especially insomnia) have been commonly associated with conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and drug and alcohol use.²³ For example, people with depression often experience insomnia. This lack of sleep inevitably exacerbates the symptoms of their depression. This negative interaction between the sleep disorder and the depression can be alleviated only by taking proactive steps to follow healthy sleep habits.

No matter what kind of psychiatric disability you have been diagnosed with, it is important to practice healthy sleep habits in order to reduce your stress. Here are some healthy sleep habits you can try:²⁴

- Develop a consistent sleep pattern. Go to sleep at the same time every night, and wake up at the same time every day.
- Keep your sleep environment quiet, dark, cool, and comfortable.
- Do not use your bedroom for doing work, reading, or watching TV. Use it only for sleep and sex.
- Don't nap because this can interfere with your sleep cycle.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid eating or drinking right before bedtime — so if you go to bed at 10 p.m., plan to stop eating at 8 p.m.
 - Follow an exercise routine (though you should try to exercise early in the day because exercising before bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep).
 - If you have been unable to sleep for 15 minutes, get up and try a quiet activity for 15 minutes.



choosing a primary care provider (pcp)

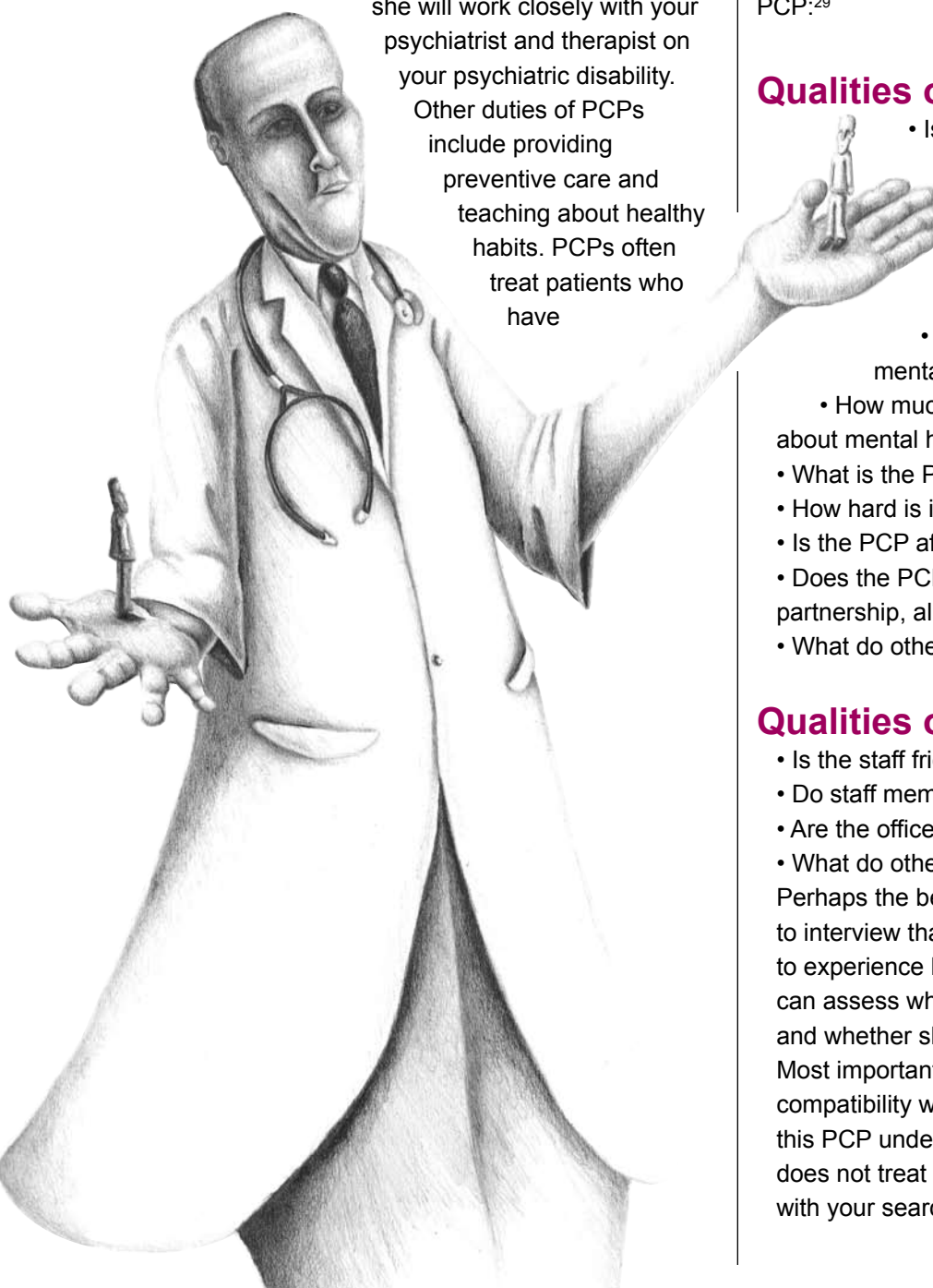
A primary care provider is a medical professional whose job it is to see you in non-emergency situations. Usually this person is a doctor, but a PCP can be a physician assistant or nurse practitioner.²⁵ A PCP can also be a doctor certified in family medicine, a pediatrician, an internist, or an obstetrician/gynecologist.²⁶

Whatever the PCP's background, ideally, he or she will work closely with your psychiatrist and therapist on your psychiatric disability. Other duties of PCPs include providing preventive care and teaching about healthy habits. PCPs often treat patients who have

common medical problems, and if problems require specialists, they will provide referrals.²⁷ While your PCP may see you only on an outpatient basis, he or she may assist in your care if you need to be admitted to a hospital.²⁸

Since you will be relying on this individual to help you make decisions about your health, it is important to choose someone you trust. Listed below are some considerations to take into account when choosing a PCP:²⁹

Qualities of the PCP

- 
- Is the PCP's communication style warm and friendly?
 - Does the PCP get back to you when you call?
 - Does the PCP use e-mail to communicate with patients?
 - Is the PCP willing to work with your mental health care providers?
 - How much knowledge does the PCP have about mental health issues?
 - What is the PCP's approach to treatment?
 - How hard is it to get a referral to a specialist?
 - Is the PCP affiliated with a hospital that you prefer?
 - Does the PCP view your relationship as a partnership, allowing you to be involved in your care?
 - What do other people say about this PCP?

Qualities of the office

- Is the staff friendly and helpful?
- Do staff members return calls in a timely manner?
- Are the office hours convenient to your schedule?
- What do other people say about this office?

Perhaps the best method for choosing a PCP is to interview that PCP in person. This allows you to experience her or his communication style. You can assess whether the PCP has time for you and whether she or he seems interested in you. Most important, you will be able to determine your compatibility with this PCP.³⁰ If you do not feel that this PCP understands your concerns or if she or he does not treat you with respect, it is time to move on with your search for a PCP.³¹

getting regular physical health check-ups

Regular physical exams with your PCP are important to maintaining your health and lowering your stress. If you have regular health screenings, the doctor might be able to detect problems before they become more difficult to handle.

Finding problems early means that your chance for treatment and for a cure is greater and that you are likely to live longer.³²



A routine physical exam involves:³³

MEDICAL HISTORY — telling your PCP about any medications you are on, diet, exercise, sexual behavior, alcohol and tobacco use, family history of diseases, immunizations, and symptoms you are feeling.

PHYSICAL EXAM — your PCP should check your height, weight and blood pressure and examine your body.

COUNSELING — your PCP should go over any risk factors you have and any habits you should work on to promote your health and decrease stress.

LAB TESTS — some PCPs will order lab tests as a routine or in response to symptoms.

It is important before you see your doctor to write a list of questions you want to ask him or her. In general, you will want to go over any health problems you have and any changes you have experienced. Be sure to be honest with your doctor about everything — even if you have not been taking medications as prescribed — so he or she can plan the best course of action for your circumstances.³⁴

For a comprehensive list of questions you can take to your doctor appointments, please see www.ahrq.gov/qual/beprepared.htm or www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer.

medication

One way to keep your stress in check is to take all of your medications as they are prescribed. This applies to medications for conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes or high cholesterol. If you are taking psychotropic medication for your psychiatric disability, it is important to advocate for yourself so you are taking the best combination that works for you. If you have a question about whether you should be taking a certain medication or if you are frustrated with the side effects of a medication, the best course of action is to express your concerns to your doctor. It is not wise to discontinue medication without your doctor's knowledge. This often puts your body under greater stress, and as a result, your quality of life diminishes.

If you are taking medication for a psychiatric disability, you might be taking more than one pill. In addition, many psychotropic medications have side effects that you might want to counteract by taking additional medication. If this is the case, you need to be sure you are taking the correct dosage of medications throughout the day. An easy way to do this is to use a seven-day pill box and fill the boxes with the appropriate medication at the beginning of the week.³⁵

Here are some recommended questions, developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, to ask your doctor when he or she prescribes you a new medication:³⁶

- What is the name of the medication, and what is it supposed to do?
- How and when do I take it, and when do I stop taking it?
- What foods, drinks, other medications or activities should I avoid while taking this medication?
- What are the side effects of the medication, and how should I deal with them?
- Is there any written information about the medication that I can have?

dental care

While the connection between dental health and stress might not be readily apparent, if you have a toothache, you are almost guaranteed to be feeling stress. Preventing tooth pain by maintaining your dental health and visiting your dentist for regular check-ups is good for your physical well-being.

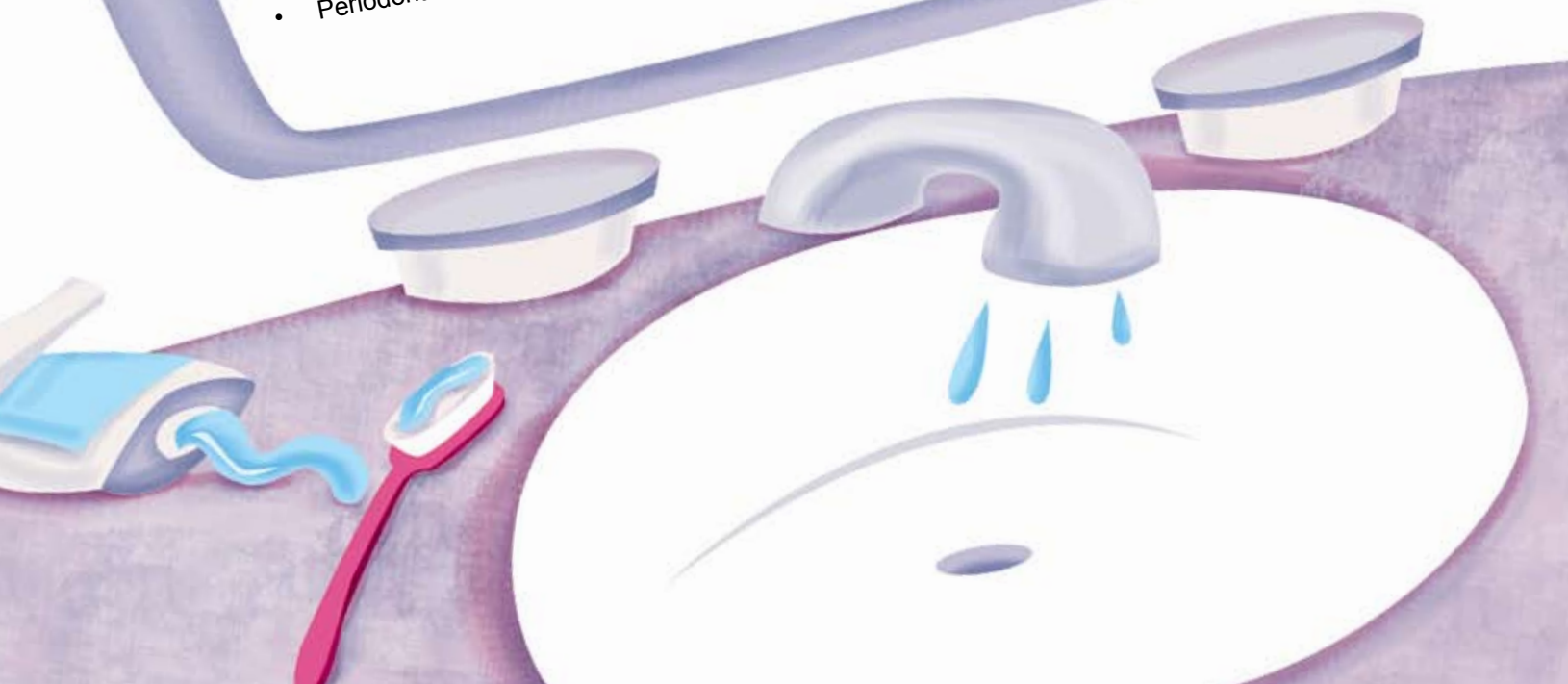
Most adults (and children) should see a dentist for regular cleanings and check-ups every six months.³⁷ But there are some instances when you should see your dentist more than twice a year.

The following conditions put you at greater risk for oral diseases and warrant more frequent check-ups:³⁸

- Regular tobacco use.
- Regular alcohol use.
- Diabetes.
- Pregnancy.
- Periodontal, or gum, disease.

Some dental facts to consider:³⁹

- Seeing the dentist for regular check-ups can prevent problems such as cavities, root canals, gum disease and oral cancer.
- Brush your teeth twice a day to remove the plaque that causes cavities. Floss your teeth as well to remove the plaque that develops between teeth.
- Healthy eating will help prevent cavities. Stay away from soft drinks and food that is high in sugar.
- Change your toothbrush every three months or so because it becomes less effective as it wears out.
- Make sure to address dental problems right away. Cavities will only get bigger over time, and if they are not filled, they can result in root canal or extraction.
- If you don't have dental insurance, you might be able to receive low-cost care at a local dental school's clinic.



alcohol and illegal drugs

STRESSFUL SITUATIONS CAN EASILY RESULT IN INCREASED ALCOHOL USE OR THE USE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS, ESPECIALLY IF YOU HAVE A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY. Having a psychiatric disability puts you at increased risk for substance dependence. Of the adults who were diagnosed with a psychiatric disability in the last year, almost 20% met criteria for substance dependence or abuse, compared with 7% of those who did not have a psychiatric disability, according to a recent report by the federal government.⁴⁰ In addition, stressful experiences make it more likely that people will relapse into drug or alcohol use, even if they have abstained for a long time.⁴¹

It is important for you as a parent with a psychiatric disability to keep your stress level manageable by engaging in mental health treatment and practicing some of the techniques mentioned in the other sections of this material, rather than using alcohol or

illegal drugs. When you are abusing substances, you are more likely to take risks such as engaging in high-risk sexual behavior and operating a motor vehicle while impaired. Also, you are more likely to have poor grades or poor job performance.⁴² Additionally, substance abuse takes its toll on your body. Long-term substance abuse can damage the liver, heart, nervous system and brain, as well as lead to high blood pressure, stomach problems, medicine interactions, sexual problems, osteoporosis and cancer.⁴³

Finally, research has shown that children exposed to drug abuse in the home have higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, anger and substance abuse.⁴⁴ Thus, when you abuse substances, not only are you setting a poor example for your child regarding how to handle stress, but you are increasing the likelihood that your child will experience mental health and substance abuse issues as well.

tobacco use

Like alcohol and drug use/abuse, tobacco use is a way people cope with stress. As a smoker, you might understand that smoking is bad for your health but at the same time believe that it helps you feel calmer when you are under stress.⁴⁵ Nicotine can have mood-altering effects on the body, making the subjective aspects of stress (such as anger, frustration and anxiety) feel less overwhelming. But smoking is a “cruel illusion,” according to the Cleveland Clinic. While people may feel calmer when they smoke, the systems in their bodies are on overload. Blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, muscles tense, blood vessels constrict, and less oxygen is available to the brain and the rest of the body.⁴⁶ Thus, it is imperative for your physical health and well-being that you do not use tobacco and that you are not exposed to nicotine.

Tips for quitting smoking:⁴⁷

- Pick a quitting day that is one to three weeks in the future, and slowly cut down on your smoking.
- On your quitting day, rid yourself of your cigarettes, and keep occupied with smoke-free activities.
- Make a clean break. Do not smoke occasionally, because an addiction to nicotine can be reignited anytime.
- Get help quitting from a smoking-cessation program if you need it.
- Ask your doctor about a recommendation for a nicotine patch.

How to deal with stress without smoking or using drugs or alcohol:⁴⁸

- Deal with your problems directly, and use mental health treatment to help you do that.
- Distract yourself with other activities that reduce stress (see Emotional Health and Wellness lesson).
- Seek support from other people, especially people who have been through addiction.
- Accept temporary stress, and learn healthy tolerance skills.

disease prevention

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and arthritis, while common, are preventable with diet, exercise and healthy habits, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The four most common causes of chronic disease are lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, tobacco use and excessive use of alcohol, all of which you can control.⁴⁹ So why is there so much chronic disease if so much of it is preventable? It is not always easy to choose a healthy lifestyle, especially when you have the stress of managing a psychiatric disability.

How to live healthier and prevent chronic diseases:⁵⁰

- Make small changes to your daily living, such as adding walking into your routine, eating a piece of fruit instead of a cookie, or having a glass of water instead of a soda.
- Try the “stealth health approach” created by Dr. David Katz, the director of the Yale Preventive Medicine Center and the author of “Stealth Health: How to Sneak Age-Defying, Disease-Fighting Habits Into Your Life Without Really Trying.” Adopt three small changes to your lifestyle for four days. When you have mastered those changes, add more. These changes can include buying whole foods in place of processed foods, starting each dinner with a salad, and raising one foot off the ground when you are standing in line.
- Do not forget the importance of sleep. Katz’s recommendations regarding sleep include using a lavender scent to promote relaxation, buying a new pillow and eating walnuts before sleep because they are a natural sleep-inducer.



conclusion

Being proactive about your health has a multitude of benefits. One of these benefits is that being healthy will make you better able to manage stress. Getting enough sleep and eating nutritious foods keeps your body strong. By regularly going to the doctor for checkups, you will be able to catch problems early, and you will be less likely to get seriously ill. Going to the dentist regularly will keep cavities and gum disease at bay so you have less pain — and less stress. And keeping your stress level low improves your mental state, whether you have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disability or not. Following these recommendations regarding physical health care will hopefully help you to be a better you, and a better parent.



homework

1. Name one healthy change you can make in your diet.
2. List the types of physical activity you could see yourself doing consistently.
3. Sleep problems often accompany psychiatric disabilities. What can you do to help improve your sleep routine?
4. What are some ways you can deal with stress that do not involve using tobacco, alcohol or drugs?
5. What are some advantages to having routine physical check-ups?

endnotes

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THE TEMPLE UNIVERSITY COLLABORATIVE ON
COMMUNITY INCLUSION
of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities

stress reduction

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

1. Introduction
2. Nutrition and Diet
3. Exercise
4. Sleep
5. Choosing a Primary Care Provider
6. Getting Regular Physical Health Check-Ups
7. Medication
8. Dental Care
9. Alcohol and Illegal Drugs
10. Tobacco Use
11. Disease Prevention
12. Conclusion
13. Homework

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introduction

As a parent, you can be guaranteed a certain amount of stress. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you experience even greater stress sometimes. This is because you must deal with managing your psychiatric disability while you are parenting. You might have to juggle child care so you can attend to treatment or manage the symptoms of your psychiatric disability, such as feeling low energy or hearing voices, while being responsive to your children's needs.

It is imperative that you take care of yourself both physically and emotionally so you can reduce the amount of stress in your life and ultimately be a better parent. While it may sometimes be a challenge to focus on physical health when dealing with a psychiatric disability, it is very important to do so. Taking care of your physical health can actually make your psychiatric disability easier to manage by preventing the stress of physical problems, which can contribute to episodes of your psychiatric disability. In addition, reducing stress and feeling physically well will make for a much more enjoyable parenting experience.

This module will focus on maintaining your physical health and wellness. We will discuss how good nutrition, exercise and healthy sleep habits will positively affect your physical wellness and lower your stress. Other aspects of maintaining your physical health, such as making regular doctor visits and handling medication issues, will also be discussed.



nutrition and diet

While genetics and environment are thought to play the most important roles in the development of mental health difficulties, your diet may also have an enormous impact on your emotional wellness.¹ The food you eat has an impact on your mood, your sleep habits, your energy, and the amount of stress you feel.² This is because food contains complex nutrients, such as proteins, fats and carbohydrates, in addition to vitamins and minerals. All of these nutrients affect the various chemicals in the brain.³ As one nutrition scientist noted, “The new research shows that the effect of food can be direct on the brain, and that it can be directly related to mood and behavior.”⁴

When it comes to psychiatric disabilities, research tends to focus on how the brain is affected by nutritional deficiencies.⁵ One common example is that people with psychiatric disabilities often have lower levels of the essential fatty acid omega-3. Omega-3 is often found in fish such as salmon or trout. Evidence seems to show that these fish oils prevent and treat depression much like common anti-depressant medication, by increasing serotonin levels in the brain.⁶ One study involving people diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia showed that supplementing diets with omega-3 fatty acids improved symptoms in up to 64% of patients.⁷ While more research on omega-3 fatty acids still needs to be done, eating a diet rich in omega-3 is likely to benefit you if you have a psychiatric disability.⁸

Other recommendations for healthy eating include:⁹

- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables (4 to 5 portions a day).
- Consume carbohydrates that offer greater nutritional value, such as whole grain bread, whole wheat pasta and brown rice.
- Proteins (fish, lean meat, cheese, eggs and nuts), calcium (broccoli and dairy products, such as milk) and fats (unsaturated) are all important to consume daily.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol because these substances cause the body to lose nutrients.
- Take vitamin and mineral supplements, but only after consulting with your doctor.





exercise

It is not known why exercise helps reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety, but some theories are that exercise:

- Releases neurotransmitters and endorphins (substances that affect the brain in positive ways).
- Helps provide a distraction from life's problems.
- Can improve a person's mood by increasing social interaction.
- Can increase self-esteem and confidence because body image and stamina are improved.¹⁵

So how do you start an exercise plan and stay motivated?

- The first step is to talk to your doctor and get a physical so you know the types of exercise that are safe for you.

- Next, you should decide what kind of exercise is best for you to do. Think about what you enjoy doing because those are the activities you are most likely to follow through on. Think about what time of day is best for you to exercise. Remember that there are a lot of options for activities, such as exercise classes at a gym, swimming at a local pool, gardening, using home fitness equipment, or going on walks with your children. Try different activities until you find one you enjoy.¹⁶

- Start slowly and break up exercise activities. Remember that when you begin your exercise program, you should start by exercising for shorter intervals and gradually work your way up to longer, more strenuous periods of activity. Even after you have built up some stamina, you can still break up your periods of exercise if you want to. Three 15-minute walks are just as good as one 45-minute walk.¹⁷

- Find a friend to exercise with, because exercising with other people can help you stay motivated. In addition, it reduces the social isolation you might sometimes feel.¹⁸

- Get more physical activity in small ways. Add physical activity to your everyday routine. For instance, park farther away from the store than you otherwise would, and take the stairs instead of the elevator.¹⁹

Like nutrition, exercise is an important component to staying healthy both physically and mentally. Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American College of Sports Medicine state that every adult in North America should exercise 30 minutes on most days of the week, preferably every day.¹⁰ Exercise has been proven to prevent and treat many types of physical illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and osteoporosis, and has been known to help in dealing with conditions such as menopause and nicotine abstinence.¹¹

Studies have also consistently shown that people with depression and anxiety benefit from routine exercise.¹² One study from the United Kingdom showed that 83% of people with psychiatric disabilities surveyed stated that exercise put them in a better mood and helped reduce their stress.¹³ Other studies have shown that “moderate aerobic workouts, done three to five times weekly, cut mild to moderate depression symptoms nearly in half.”¹⁴

sleep

On average, people need approximately eight hours of sleep a night. A recent poll conducted in America revealed that almost 1 in 5 people get only about six hours of sleep per night.²⁰ In order to reduce the stress you feel as a parent with a psychiatric disability, it is critical that you try to sleep at least eight hours per night as often as possible.

This poll also found that nearly 7 in 10 people experience sleep problems.²¹ Sleep problems can include:²²

- Snoring and sleep apnea — reawakening during the night because of obstructed breathing.
- Insomnia — the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep.
- Hypersomnia — sleeping too much.
- Parasomnias — for instance, sleepwalking, sleep terrors, and sleep eating.
- Sleep paralysis — during the transition from sleep to waking, the person may find that his or her body seems paralyzed.

- Circadian rhythm disorders — the natural body clock gets out of sync.
- Narcolepsy — excessive daytime sleepiness.

While the connection between mental health and sleep is not entirely clear, sleep disorders such as those listed above (especially insomnia) have been commonly associated with conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and drug and alcohol use.²³ For example, people with depression often experience insomnia. This lack of sleep inevitably exacerbates the symptoms of their depression. This negative interaction between the sleep disorder and the depression can be alleviated only by taking proactive steps to follow healthy sleep habits.

No matter what kind of psychiatric disability you have been diagnosed with, it is important to practice healthy sleep habits in order to reduce your stress. Here are some healthy sleep habits you can try:²⁴

- Develop a consistent sleep pattern. Go to sleep at the same time every night, and wake up at the same time every day.
- Keep your sleep environment quiet, dark, cool, and comfortable.
- Do not use your bedroom for doing work, reading, or watching TV. Use it only for sleep and sex.
- Don't nap because this can interfere with your sleep cycle.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid eating or drinking right before bedtime — so if you go to bed at 10 p.m., plan to stop eating at 8 p.m.
 - Follow an exercise routine (though you should try to exercise early in the day because exercising before bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep).
 - If you have been unable to sleep for 15 minutes, get up and try a quiet activity for 15 minutes.



choosing a primary care provider (pcp)

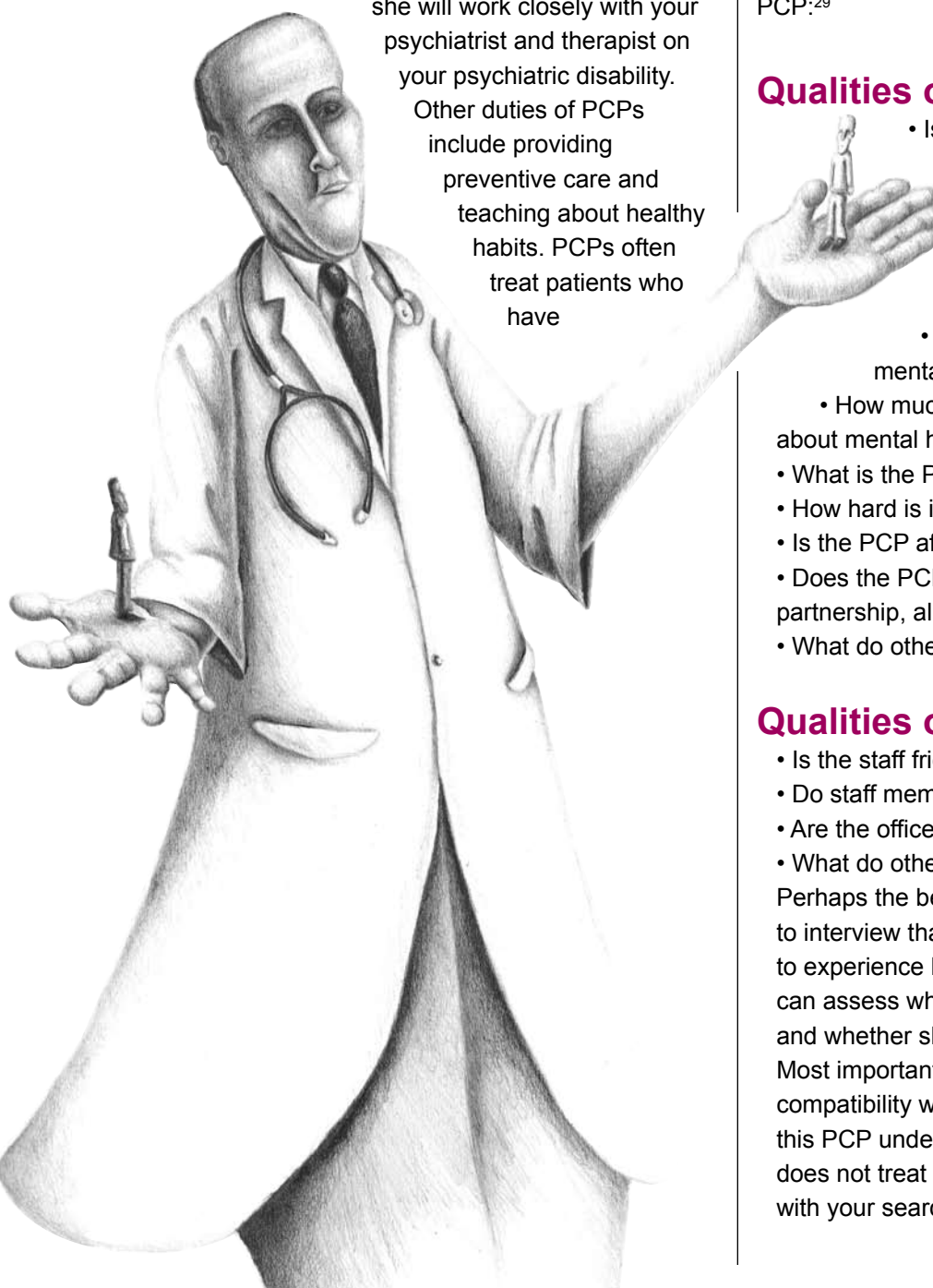
A primary care provider is a medical professional whose job it is to see you in non-emergency situations. Usually this person is a doctor, but a PCP can be a physician assistant or nurse practitioner.²⁵ A PCP can also be a doctor certified in family medicine, a pediatrician, an internist, or an obstetrician/gynecologist.²⁶

Whatever the PCP's background, ideally, he or she will work closely with your psychiatrist and therapist on your psychiatric disability. Other duties of PCPs include providing preventive care and teaching about healthy habits. PCPs often treat patients who have

common medical problems, and if problems require specialists, they will provide referrals.²⁷ While your PCP may see you only on an outpatient basis, he or she may assist in your care if you need to be admitted to a hospital.²⁸

Since you will be relying on this individual to help you make decisions about your health, it is important to choose someone you trust. Listed below are some considerations to take into account when choosing a PCP:²⁹

Qualities of the PCP

- 
- Is the PCP's communication style warm and friendly?
 - Does the PCP get back to you when you call?
 - Does the PCP use e-mail to communicate with patients?
 - Is the PCP willing to work with your mental health care providers?
 - How much knowledge does the PCP have about mental health issues?
 - What is the PCP's approach to treatment?
 - How hard is it to get a referral to a specialist?
 - Is the PCP affiliated with a hospital that you prefer?
 - Does the PCP view your relationship as a partnership, allowing you to be involved in your care?
 - What do other people say about this PCP?

Qualities of the office

- Is the staff friendly and helpful?
- Do staff members return calls in a timely manner?
- Are the office hours convenient to your schedule?
- What do other people say about this office?

Perhaps the best method for choosing a PCP is to interview that PCP in person. This allows you to experience her or his communication style. You can assess whether the PCP has time for you and whether she or he seems interested in you. Most important, you will be able to determine your compatibility with this PCP.³⁰ If you do not feel that this PCP understands your concerns or if she or he does not treat you with respect, it is time to move on with your search for a PCP.³¹

getting regular physical health check-ups

Regular physical exams with your PCP are important to maintaining your health and lowering your stress. If you have regular health screenings, the doctor might be able to detect problems before they become more difficult to handle.

Finding problems early means that your chance for treatment and for a cure is greater and that you are likely to live longer.³²



A routine physical exam involves:³³

MEDICAL HISTORY — telling your PCP about any medications you are on, diet, exercise, sexual behavior, alcohol and tobacco use, family history of diseases, immunizations, and symptoms you are feeling.

PHYSICAL EXAM — your PCP should check your height, weight and blood pressure and examine your body.

COUNSELING — your PCP should go over any risk factors you have and any habits you should work on to promote your health and decrease stress.

LAB TESTS — some PCPs will order lab tests as a routine or in response to symptoms.

It is important before you see your doctor to write a list of questions you want to ask him or her. In general, you will want to go over any health problems you have and any changes you have experienced. Be sure to be honest with your doctor about everything — even if you have not been taking medications as prescribed — so he or she can plan the best course of action for your circumstances.³⁴

For a comprehensive list of questions you can take to your doctor appointments, please see www.ahrq.gov/qual/beprepared.htm or www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer.

medication

One way to keep your stress in check is to take all of your medications as they are prescribed. This applies to medications for conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes or high cholesterol. If you are taking psychotropic medication for your psychiatric disability, it is important to advocate for yourself so you are taking the best combination that works for you. If you have a question about whether you should be taking a certain medication or if you are frustrated with the side effects of a medication, the best course of action is to express your concerns to your doctor. It is not wise to discontinue medication without your doctor's knowledge. This often puts your body under greater stress, and as a result, your quality of life diminishes.

If you are taking medication for a psychiatric disability, you might be taking more than one pill. In addition, many psychotropic medications have side effects that you might want to counteract by taking additional medication. If this is the case, you need to be sure you are taking the correct dosage of medications throughout the day. An easy way to do this is to use a seven-day pill box and fill the boxes with the appropriate medication at the beginning of the week.³⁵

Here are some recommended questions, developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, to ask your doctor when he or she prescribes you a new medication:³⁶

- What is the name of the medication, and what is it supposed to do?
- How and when do I take it, and when do I stop taking it?
- What foods, drinks, other medications or activities should I avoid while taking this medication?
- What are the side effects of the medication, and how should I deal with them?
- Is there any written information about the medication that I can have?

dental care

While the connection between dental health and stress might not be readily apparent, if you have a toothache, you are almost guaranteed to be feeling stress. Preventing tooth pain by maintaining your dental health and visiting your dentist for regular check-ups is good for your physical well-being.

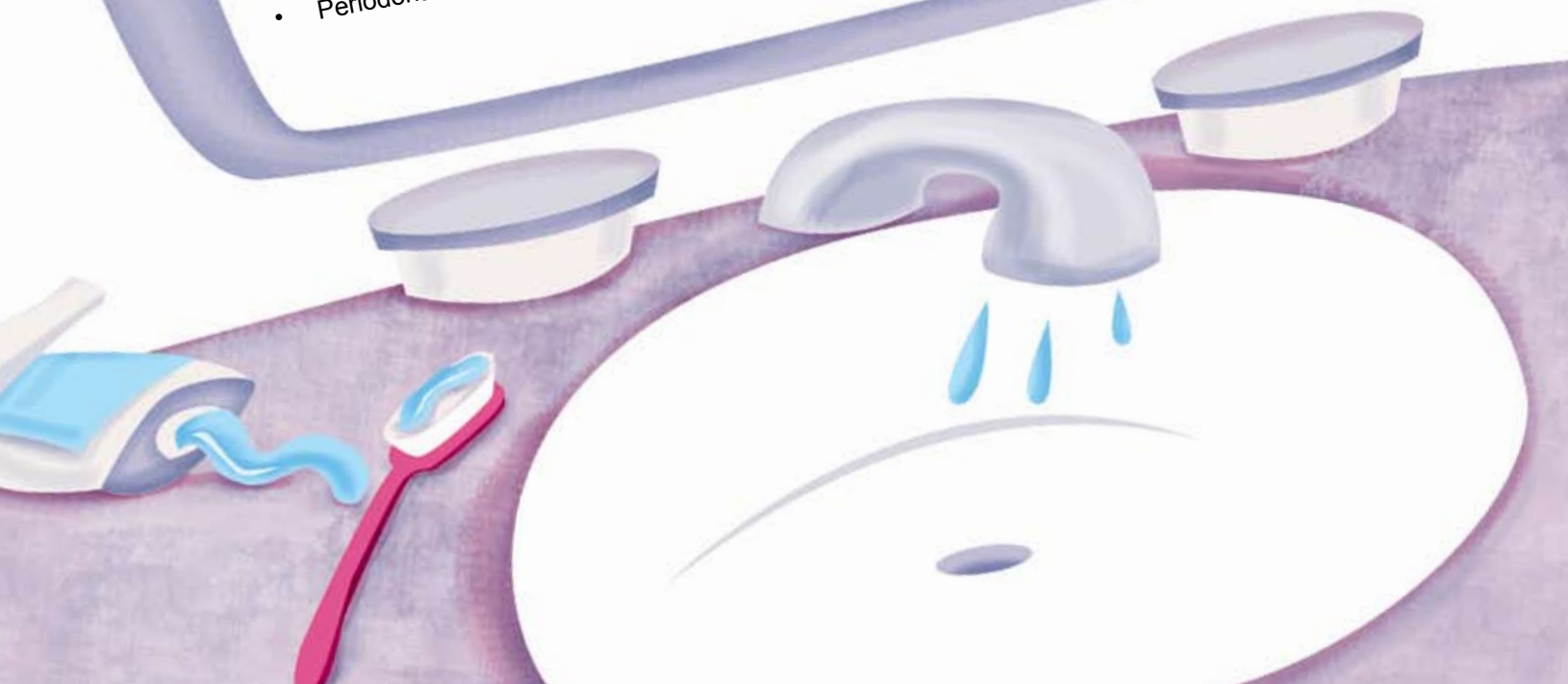
Most adults (and children) should see a dentist for regular cleanings and check-ups every six months.³⁷ But there are some instances when you should see your dentist more than twice a year.

The following conditions put you at greater risk for oral diseases and warrant more frequent check-ups:³⁸

- Regular tobacco use.
- Regular alcohol use.
- Diabetes.
- Pregnancy.
- Periodontal, or gum, disease.

Some dental facts to consider:³⁹

- Seeing the dentist for regular check-ups can prevent problems such as cavities, root canals, gum disease and oral cancer.
- Brush your teeth twice a day to remove the plaque that causes cavities. Floss your teeth as well to remove the plaque that develops between teeth.
- Healthy eating will help prevent cavities. Stay away from soft drinks and food that is high in sugar.
- Change your toothbrush every three months or so because it becomes less effective as it wears out.
- Make sure to address dental problems right away. Cavities will only get bigger over time, and if they are not filled, they can result in root canal or extraction.
- If you don't have dental insurance, you might be able to receive low-cost care at a local dental school's clinic.



alcohol and illegal drugs

STRESSFUL SITUATIONS CAN EASILY RESULT IN INCREASED ALCOHOL USE OR THE USE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS, ESPECIALLY IF YOU HAVE A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY. Having a psychiatric disability puts you at increased risk for substance dependence. Of the adults who were diagnosed with a psychiatric disability in the last year, almost 20% met criteria for substance dependence or abuse, compared with 7% of those who did not have a psychiatric disability, according to a recent report by the federal government.⁴⁰ In addition, stressful experiences make it more likely that people will relapse into drug or alcohol use, even if they have abstained for a long time.⁴¹

It is important for you as a parent with a psychiatric disability to keep your stress level manageable by engaging in mental health treatment and practicing some of the techniques mentioned in the other sections of this material, rather than using alcohol or

illegal drugs. When you are abusing substances, you are more likely to take risks such as engaging in high-risk sexual behavior and operating a motor vehicle while impaired. Also, you are more likely to have poor grades or poor job performance.⁴² Additionally, substance abuse takes its toll on your body. Long-term substance abuse can damage the liver, heart, nervous system and brain, as well as lead to high blood pressure, stomach problems, medicine interactions, sexual problems, osteoporosis and cancer.⁴³

Finally, research has shown that children exposed to drug abuse in the home have higher rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, anger and substance abuse.⁴⁴ Thus, when you abuse substances, not only are you setting a poor example for your child regarding how to handle stress, but you are increasing the likelihood that your child will experience mental health and substance abuse issues as well.

tobacco use

Like alcohol and drug use/abuse, tobacco use is a way people cope with stress. As a smoker, you might understand that smoking is bad for your health but at the same time believe that it helps you feel calmer when you are under stress.⁴⁵ Nicotine can have mood-altering effects on the body, making the subjective aspects of stress (such as anger, frustration and anxiety) feel less overwhelming. But smoking is a “cruel illusion,” according to the Cleveland Clinic. While people may feel calmer when they smoke, the systems in their bodies are on overload. Blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, muscles tense, blood vessels constrict, and less oxygen is available to the brain and the rest of the body.⁴⁶ Thus, it is imperative for your physical health and well-being that you do not use tobacco and that you are not exposed to nicotine.

Tips for quitting smoking:⁴⁷

- Pick a quitting day that is one to three weeks in the future, and slowly cut down on your smoking.
- On your quitting day, rid yourself of your cigarettes, and keep occupied with smoke-free activities.
- Make a clean break. Do not smoke occasionally, because an addiction to nicotine can be reignited anytime.
- Get help quitting from a smoking-cessation program if you need it.
- Ask your doctor about a recommendation for a nicotine patch.

How to deal with stress without smoking or using drugs or alcohol:⁴⁸

- Deal with your problems directly, and use mental health treatment to help you do that.
- Distract yourself with other activities that reduce stress (see Emotional Health and Wellness lesson).
- Seek support from other people, especially people who have been through addiction.
- Accept temporary stress, and learn healthy tolerance skills.

disease prevention

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and arthritis, while common, are preventable with diet, exercise and healthy habits, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The four most common causes of chronic disease are lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, tobacco use and excessive use of alcohol, all of which you can control.⁴⁹ So why is there so much chronic disease if so much of it is preventable? It is not always easy to choose a healthy lifestyle, especially when you have the stress of managing a psychiatric disability.

How to live healthier and prevent chronic diseases:⁵⁰

- Make small changes to your daily living, such as adding walking into your routine, eating a piece of fruit instead of a cookie, or having a glass of water instead of a soda.
- Try the “stealth health approach” created by Dr. David Katz, the director of the Yale Preventive Medicine Center and the author of “Stealth Health: How to Sneak Age-Defying, Disease-Fighting Habits Into Your Life Without Really Trying.” Adopt three small changes to your lifestyle for four days. When you have mastered those changes, add more. These changes can include buying whole foods in place of processed foods, starting each dinner with a salad, and raising one foot off the ground when you are standing in line.
- Do not forget the importance of sleep. Katz’s recommendations regarding sleep include using a lavender scent to promote relaxation, buying a new pillow and eating walnuts before sleep because they are a natural sleep-inducer.



conclusion

Being proactive about your health has a multitude of benefits. One of these benefits is that being healthy will make you better able to manage stress. Getting enough sleep and eating nutritious foods keeps your body strong. By regularly going to the doctor for checkups, you will be able to catch problems early, and you will be less likely to get seriously ill. Going to the dentist regularly will keep cavities and gum disease at bay so you have less pain — and less stress. And keeping your stress level low improves your mental state, whether you have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disability or not. Following these recommendations regarding physical health care will hopefully help you to be a better you, and a better parent.



homework

1. Name one healthy change you can make in your diet.
2. List the types of physical activity you could see yourself doing consistently.
3. Sleep problems often accompany psychiatric disabilities. What can you do to help improve your sleep routine?
4. What are some ways you can deal with stress that do not involve using tobacco, alcohol or drugs?
5. What are some advantages to having routine physical check-ups?

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