

Creating a Strong Family Effective Management of Stress and Crisis

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNLExtension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

Dealing Positively With Life's Challenges

Research on strong families across the country and around the world reveals useful approaches to dealing with stress and crises in one's life in a positive manner. The following ideas come from worldwide research on strong families, involving more than 24,000 family members in 35 countries. Here are some approaches your family can use during difficult times.

- Look for something positive and focus on that positive element in a difficult situation.
- Pull together rather than apart. Don't see the problem as an individual's problem but as a challenge for the whole family.
- Get help outside the nuclear family when needed. Seek help from extended family members, supportive friends, neighbors, colleagues, members of your religious community, professionals in the community, or others. In a manner of speaking, it takes a whole village to resolve a crisis.
- Create open channels of communication. Challenges are not met when communication shuts down.
- Keep things in perspective. "These things, too, shall pass."
- Adopt new roles in a flexible manner. Crises often demand that you learn new approaches to life and take on different responsibilities.
- Focus on what is most important and minimize fragmentation. Without focusing on the essentials, the details, details, details can get you edgy, even hysterical.
- Give up on worrying or put your cares in a box. Worrying usually causes people more misery than the actual event they are worrying about. Sometimes it's best to stuff the worry down or resolve to worry 10 minutes a day and then forget it. The mind simply has to rest.
- Eat well, exercise, love each other, and get adequate sleep. Often adults forget that they are biological beings, not unlike kindergartners. We all need a good lunch, and we need to play. We need to have our hair stroked, and we need a good nap.
- Create a life full of meaning and purpose. All people face severe crises in life. You will not be able to avoid these challenges. Rather, your aim can be to live a useful life of service to your community. This brings a richness and dignity to your life, in spite of the troubles you endure.
- Actively meet your challenges head-on. Disaster in life does not go away when you look in another direction. But, it is also helpful sometimes to withdraw for a time and replenish yourself.
- Go with the flow to some degree. Sometimes you are relatively powerless in the face of crisis. At this point it can be useful to simply tell yourself to "let it go."
- Prepare in advance for the challenges in life. Healthy family relationships are like an ample bank balance: If you have kept your relational accounts in order, you will be able to weather life's most difficult storms ... together.
- Know how to laugh and know how to cry, for both are essential to maintain an emotional balance in life.
- Do not blame others for your fate but work with others to build a more satisfying world for all.
- Take life's challenges one day at a time. In especially tight situations, you sometimes need to take things one hour at a time or perhaps one minute at a time.
- Realize that suffering can be a catalyst for positive growth. Crisis, by definition, is a difficult time in your life. However, it also can be a turning point, planting the seeds for a satisfying and successful future. This is hard to internalize but useful to remember.
- Identify spiritually with the grand procession of life: Through good times and bad, we, as individuals, come and go, but life from whence we all spring is eternal. There is something satisfying and soothing about that thought.

Reframing a Difficult Family Situation

Strong families know how to manage difficult times in life creatively. Many counselors believe that one of the most important things a family can do in a time of crisis is to *reframe* the situation, i.e., look at what is happening to the family from a different perspective. For example, if a mother is a member of a National Guard unit that is being deployed outside the United States in a time of national uncertainty, this is clearly a significant challenge for the father, children, grandparents, and other loved ones left behind. Countless questions come up: Will Mom be OK? Can everyone left behind adjust to life without her for a while? Can Dad and the kids share the many roles Mom plays while she is gone?

But in many critical times such as this one, families often have little choice in the situation. Each individual family member can spiral down into depression or anger over the difficulty he or she will face when Mom leaves. Or the family can hold a series of group discussions and focus on how they can work together to meet the challenges they face. They can find ways to maintain communication with Mom, even though she will be physically absent, to ensure she will keep a strong psychological presence in the family. Dad can figure out ways to adjust and hone his skills as a parent to new levels of competence. The kids can brainstorm ways they can contribute to the family's well-being and fill in the gaps caused by Mom's physical absence. Grandparents, often eager to contribute to the family's welfare, can offer suggestions on how they might help.

If the family can see the situation as not only a serious difficulty but also an opportunity to strengthen their bonds with each other, the challenge can be met. The key is positive communication with each other: Anything mentionable is manageable. In essence, if we can find the courage to talk with each other about a problem, we can find ways to solve it.

"I wouldn't ever want to go through something like that again," people are likely to say, "but I wouldn't take a million dollars for the love we now share with each other as a result of our ability to support and care for each other till the crisis was over." Families sometimes fall into disarray during times of crisis. Those families that can recover from the initial shock and sense of despair and band together to find solutions to their difficulties commonly say they feel stronger and more appreciative of each other as family members.

Resource

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**Index: Family
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