

How Strong Families Manage Stress and Crisis

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Lesson Goals:

The goals of this program are to help people working with groups of adults in the community:

- Learn about the useful things strong families do in times of stress and crisis.
- Identify their own strengths that they have found useful in difficult times.
- Share these strengths with each other so everyone can learn new ways to manage stressful times in their lives.

Lesson Objectives:

- Participants will use the *Stress Checklist* to think about the ways they manage stress effectively in their family.
- Participants will see the positive things members of their family do when faced with challenges in life. Volunteers will be encouraged to share brief stories illustrating how their family has used their strengths to rise above difficulties in life.

Introduction:

Based on studies of family strengths across the country and around the world, research has revealed the qualities that make families strong and secure in the face of adversity.

Six major family strengths are commonly found in families everywhere:

1. *Appreciation and affection for each other.* People in strong families deeply care for one another, and they let each other know this on a regular basis. They are not afraid to express their love.
2. *Commitment.* Members of strong families show a strong commitment to one another, investing time and energy in family activities and not letting their work or other priorities take too much time away from family interaction.
3. *Positive communication.* Successful families are often task-oriented in their communication, identifying problems and discussing how to solve them together. Perhaps even more important than this, strong families also spend time talking with and listening to one another just to stay connected. Some of the most important talk occurs when no one is working at connection. Open-ended, rambling conversations can reveal important information, which helps smooth out the bumps of family living.
4. *Enjoyable time together.* One study of 1,500 schoolchildren asked, "What do you think makes a happy family?" Few replied that money, cars, fancy homes, television sets, or Disney World made a happy family. The kids were most likely to say that a happy family is one that does things together, a family that genuinely enjoys the time they share with each other.

5. *Spiritual well-being.* Religion or spirituality is very important in the lives of many strong families. We use the term spiritual well-being to describe this concept, indicating that it can include organized religion, but not necessarily so. People in strong families describe this concept in a wide variety of ways. Some talk about faith in God, hope, or a sense of optimism in life; some say they feel a oneness with the world. Others talk about their families in almost religious terms, describing the love they feel for one another with a great deal of reverence. Others express these kinds of feelings in terms of ethical values and commitment to important causes. Spiritual well-being can be seen as the caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion. It is a feeling or force that helps people transcend themselves and their petty day-to-day hassles, and focus on that which is sacred to them in life.
6. **The ability to manage stress and crisis effectively.** Strong families are not immune to stress and crisis, but they are not as crisis-prone as troubled families tend to be. Rather, they possess the ability to manage both daily stressors and difficult life crises creatively and effectively. They know how to prevent trouble before it happens and how to work together to meet challenges when they inevitably occur in life.

Recommended Resources:

Web site

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension resources on strong families: <http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/hfc/strongfamilies>

Books

DeFrain, J., and the Extension UNL for Families Writing Team. (2007). *Family Treasures: Creating Strong Families*. Shanghai, China and Lincoln: iUniverse Publishers.

This practical book by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension focuses on the six major qualities of strong families and offers more than 60 activities that families can do to enhance their strengths. Available from: <http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/hfc/strongfamilies>

Olson, D. H., DeFrain, J., and Skogrand, L. (2008). *Marriages And Families: Intimacy, Diversity And Strengths* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

This 550-page textbook is a useful resource for those interested in learning about marriages and families from a strengths-based perspective. It covers a broad range of topics including communication and conflict resolution, managing financial resources, gender roles and power, dating and early marriage, parenthood, the middle and later years, single-parent and stepfamilies, families in crisis, and many other areas.

Activity: Stress Checklist

This lesson focuses on the sixth family strength. Research on strong families reveals many useful, positive approaches that are used to deal with stress and crises in one's life. The *Stress and Crisis Checklist* below is a list of strategies that tend to help families deal with stressful situations. Please put an "S" for Strength besides each one of the approaches that your family uses.

- _____ ***We look for something positive*** and focus on that positive element during a difficult situation.
- _____ ***We pull together rather than apart.*** We don't see the problem as an individual's problem but as a challenge for the whole family.
- _____ ***We get help outside the nuclear family when we need it.*** Help may come from extended family members, supportive friends, neighbors, colleagues, members of our religious community, or professionals in the community. "It takes a whole village to resolve a crisis."
- _____ ***We create open channels of communication.*** Challenges are not met when communication shuts down.
- _____ ***We keep things in perspective.*** "These things, too, shall pass."
- _____ ***We adopt new roles in a flexible manner.*** Crises often demand that individuals learn new approaches to life and take on different responsibilities.
- _____ ***We focus on what is most important.*** Without focus on the essential things in life, we sometimes get lost and miss the forest for the trees.
- _____ ***We give up on worrying, or put our 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 each day and then forget it. The mind simply has to rest.
- _____ ***We eat well, exercise, love each other, and get adequate sleep.*** Often human beings forget that they are biological beings. Not unlike kindergarteners, we all need a good lunch, and we need to play. We need to have our hair stroked, and we need a good nap.
- _____ ***We create a life full of meaning and purpose.*** All people face severe crises in life. We will not be able to avoid these challenges. Rather, our aim can be to live a useful life of service to our community. This brings a richness and dignity to our lives, in spite of the troubles we endure.
- _____ ***We actively meet our challenges head on.*** Disaster in life does not go away when we look in another direction. But, it is also helpful sometimes to withdraw for a time and replenish ourselves.
- _____ ***We go with the flow to some degree.*** Sometimes we are relatively powerless in the face of crisis. At this point it can be useful to simply "let go, let God."
- _____ ***We are prepared in advance for the challenges in life.*** Healthy family relationships are like an ample bank balance: If we have kept our relational accounts in order, we will be able to weather life's most difficult storms — together.
- _____ ***We know how to laugh and we know how to cry,*** for both are essential if we are to maintain an emotional balance in life.
- _____ ***We do not blame others for our fate,*** but work with others to build a more satisfying world for all.
- _____ ***We take life's challenges one day at a time.*** In especially tight situations, we sometimes need to take things one hour at a time, or perhaps one minute at a time.
- _____ ***We realize that suffering can be a catalyst for positive growth.*** Crisis, by definition, is a difficult time in our lives. But 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.
- _____ ***We identify spiritually with the grand procession of life:*** Through good times and bad times we as individuals come and go, but life from whence we all spring is eternal. There is something satisfying and soothing about that thought.

In the space below, please add other useful approaches for managing stress and crisis that you have found helpful in your family:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the most stressful time you remember?
2. From the list, what are some of the best qualities you have as a family?
3. From the list, what is one technique that you would like to work on with your family?
4. If you had a severe stress or crisis in your family, what helped the most to get you through the situation?

Another Activity:

Draw a line across a paper. On the left, write your birth date; on the right, today's date. Now, mark dates indicating major crisis points in your life. Think about the times immediately following each one. How did you and your family get through the crisis? How did your life change? How did you grow? Are there things you still struggle with? What did you learn that has helped you face other crises in your life?

Community Lesson

Evaluation Form for Members/Participants

1. I am:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Under 29
<input type="checkbox"/>	30-39
<input type="checkbox"/>	40-49

<input type="checkbox"/>	50-59
<input type="checkbox"/>	60-69
<input type="checkbox"/>	70 or older

2. Are you attending this program as a part of a club/group/etc.?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes
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<input type="checkbox"/>	No
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If so, please specify what club, group, organization / agency or other:

3. Please indicate which lesson you completed: (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Bite When the Temperature is Right</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Living Resourcefully: Finding Ways to Make Your Dollars Go Further</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>How Strong Families Deal with Stress and Crisis</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Purchasing "Green" — What Does It Really Mean?</i>

4. How much of the lesson did you complete? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	All
<input type="checkbox"/>	About half
<input type="checkbox"/>	About one-quarter

5. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. Circle a number for each.

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1. This topic is important to me and addresses issues that I need to know more about.	1	2	3	4
2. I am more knowledgeable about the topic covered.	1	2	3	4
3. I will use this information in making informed decisions in the future.	1	2	3	4
4. The information covered in this lesson will impact my life in a positive way.	1	2	3	4

One way is (please list): _____

5. I will share this information with others who could use this information.	1	2	3	4
6. Because of this lesson, I will make a change in what I do related to this topic.	1	2	3	4

Changes I plan to make include (please list): _____

Please mail to:

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