



## Stress Resiliency for Parents

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### Stress Resiliency Factors

Why is it that some people go through stressful situations with calm and grace and others seem completely overwhelmed by stress? Why is it that some days seem easier than others for us, so that one day we may not be troubled by stress and on another day we may feel that we're going to snap? The answer to these questions is **stress resiliency**, or the ability to deal with stress. Some people have more of it than others, and sometimes we have more of it than at other times.

These days many psychologists think about stress resiliency in terms of **resources**. Resources can be internal, such as the ability to stay calm and think before we speak or act. Resources can also be social, financial, or cultural. When the demands of stressors are greater than our available resources, we experience stress. On the other hand, when we have many resources we will be able to meet life's challenges with energy and skill. So it goes like this:

Stressors > Resources = Stress

Resources > Stressors = Fun

A life situation that is agonizing for one person may be a source of joy, excitement, and meaning for another. In fact, the same situation can be exhilarating one week and stressful for us the next, depending on our resources.

The good news is that **resources can be developed**, especially **inner resources** such as being calm in the face of stress. Many people meditate to cultivate their inner resources.

**Cultivating acceptance**—The difference between having a meaningful, fun life or a very stressful one depends a lot on how we view the situations we're in. Do we resist change and difficulties or do we try to accept and deal with them? The situation reminds me of backpacking in the mountains. When you are walking in the mountains, at high altitude, with a heavy pack, you could focus all of your attention on the weight of the pack, the thin air, and the developing blisters on your left toes. In fact, if you did, probably no one would be surprised! As an alternative, you could accept these discomforts as part of the trip and that would leave you free to also notice the intoxicating beauty of the mountains. The goal is not to always just revel in the beauty, because after all, blisters need to be noticed and attended to. The important thing is to realize that all suffering passes, just as all beauty does. Hanging on to one and resisting change is a recipe for stress. This observation leads me to another resiliency factor I want to discuss, perspective taking.

**Taking a perspective**—Being able to stand back from the flow of our lives and see things in the bigger picture is called perspective taking. Parents are busy and often feel pulled in many directions

at once, but there is also some joy in caring for others that we can notice and appreciate. Many people find that meditation helps them develop this “big picture,” because by letting go of our habitual patterns of thinking and feeling for a moment, just to notice our breathing, we see our problems in a different perspective. We can notice that even if our problems stay the same, our feelings and thoughts about them will come and go, so we can still experience joy in tough situations if we take these quiet moments of meditation for ourselves on a regular basis. We can also feel joy and nourishment from simple activities like being in nature. Many people use prayer in this way to cope with stress by feeling a sense of connection to something larger than ourselves.

**Cultivating positive qualities**—This is the hallmark of the positive psychology movement. Psychology has long concerned itself with illness, but psychologists are now looking at positive qualities, such as happiness, gratitude, and satisfaction with life. The research in my lab indicates that people with more happiness, gratitude, and sense of spirituality cope better with stressors, such as natural disasters.

**Setting limits on media time**—It is wise to limit activities, be organized, and turn off the TV, email, computer games, web, and telephone. **Use these resources rather than letting them use you.** Setting limits on media time is important for everyone in the family. A recent study showed that more media time for kids was linked to worse health and mental health. Set aside certain times of the day for media and turn it off for the rest, especially for the kids.

**Putting family first**—Try to have family meals together, using family as a source of strength and support. Many people’s families are battlegrounds are at least sources of tension that they wish to escape when they get home. Growing a strong family can be the best source of support a person can have. **Study after study shows that support from our friends and families is a major factor in resiliency to stress.**

**Ask for support**—Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it to get your family back on track. You may feel alone at times, but you may feel reassured to know that other parents have the same struggles and have learned skills for dealing with them. Reach out to other parents, relatives, clergy, or parenting professionals. We’ve all been there!

**Self-care**—Self-care is where many parents skimp. If we feel pressed for time we tend leave ourselves out of the picture. Taking time for exercise, prayer, meditation, or reflection is important to “refill the tank” so that we have something to offer others. Take a moment every morning for quiet and centering. This is a lovely way to start the day. So many parents want to give nonstop but the well will run dry if it is not replenished. **It is important to spend at least a half hour a day on self-care.** It can’t be left to the weekend or, worse yet, until summer vacation. If we don’t take care of ourselves the result is that we run an energy deficit that we try to fill by consuming things, such as food or by shopping. We try to draw the energy we need from these activities, but they can’t fill the need for self-nourishment that we have. Care for yourself so you have something to give as a parent!