

# Family Members Handle Stress Differently

Stress is part of life, but should not always be perceived as a negative. Stress generated by an approaching deadline or the need to get the grass mowed before it rains can be a motivating factor. What is called “distress,” may be generated by an accident, job loss, illness, change or event that can disrupt physical and emotional well-being. Either can—and usually will—affect family life. Also, age and stage in life become important considerations in managing stress successfully.

If, for example, a partner, spouse or parent loses his or her job, the loss will extend beyond the paycheck, and cause stress—and distress—in the family. As the news settles in, the pressure to replace the paycheck can be a motivating factor in the search for a new job.

And, the distress due to the loss of wages (and financial security the lost wages provided) can generate physical and emotional responses that affect everyone in the family. A couple’s communication skills will be key factors in managing such situations.

When faced with a stressful situation, it’s best not to assume that you know how others are feeling. Couples need to work together, be respectful, and step up to share the responsibility, rather than trying to place blame. Let go of anger that can intensify the

stress and damage relationships. Make time to talk about the stressor, but, if tempers flare, take 20 minutes or more for a time out to calm down before resuming the conversation or making a date for discussion.

In talking with each other, listen intently to what the other person has to say, without interrupting or rushing to judgment. Choose body language—a nod, smile or continuing eye contact are examples—to let your spouse or partner know that he or she has your full attention.

In modeling stress management for the family, parents are encouraged to consider how much of the stress-producing issue they should share with their children. A job loss, illness or relocation brings change and the need to accept—or acknowledge—change. Parents are advised to go with the flow in developing a plan and lead by example. Be honest and sincere; try not to magnify an issue, but don’t discount it or try to cover it up, either.

While younger children may be shielded from some stress, teenagers who pick up on distress in the family should not be expected to handle it as their parents or other adults do. A teenager is typically trying to find out who he or she is and they’re becoming aware of the challenges of life, but usually will prefer to

watch as parents and older siblings manage stress.

Saying that isn't the same as saying older children should avoid all stress, however. A teen's observations of how family members cope with stress can be a helpful learning process. Parents are reminded that gender is a factor in communicating with teenagers.

Teenage boys are known to keep their feelings to themselves. Parents also should be aware that a teenage boy often will be more likely to share what's going on in his life while occupied with an activity such as playing basketball, rather than when asked a direct question.

Windshield time works too, and riding in a car together can sometimes generate conversation with teens, including opportunities for them to let parents know what's going on.

In contrast, teenage girls often are better able to express their feelings and concerns.

Either way, parents are advised as they are confronting family distress to stick to the facts, but try not to overload children with too much information, and to listen to a teen, but try not to pry. Parenting a teenager and leading him, her—or them—through stress and inevitable life changes is similar to the role of a coach. The team is in the home (rather than on the field), and the goal is nurturing family relationships.

Nancy B. Peterson  
K-State Research & Extension  
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS  
nancyp@ksu.edu  
<http://www.ksre.ksu.edu>

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., CFLE  
School of Family Studies and Human Services  
K-State Research & Extension  
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS  
colsen@ksu.edu or 785-532-5773

Elaine Johannes, Ph.D.  
School of Family Studies and Human Services  
K-State Research & Extension  
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS  
ejohanne@ksu.edu or 785-532-5773