

# Parents Should Learn to Identify Stressors

by Nancy Hawkins

**I**f we define the stress response as English health educator J. Macdonald Wallace did, “the body’s response to a demand for change,” parents are candidates for a high degree of stress.

As parents, we deal with continually changing demands on our time, patience, energy and ingenuity. Although we may be excited by the challenges of being parents, few of us have completely realistic expectations about the additional stress that parenting can entail.

By understanding what happens to our bodies under prolonged or intense stress, we can see why learning to manage stress is important. As parents, we have an even better reason for preserving our health than we did before we had a child.

When our bodies are under stress, we experience physiological arousal. That is, our heart rate and respiration increase, our blood pressure and blood sugar rise and our digestion slows down. The blood rushes to our muscles to help us get ready for “flight or fight.”

These are normal reactions. However, if these reactions happen too frequently, the body doesn’t have time to recuperate between reactions, or if they happen with too much intensity, then physiological changes occur in the body. Tissues and organs may become affected. They may fail to adapt adequately and malfunctions may lead to headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, digestive difficulties, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart problems and possibly even cancer.

Learning to manage intense and chronic stress is an important part of maintaining good physical as well as emotional health. Managing stress doesn’t mean avoiding it, but rather recovering more rapidly after the actual or perceived danger has passed. It also means learning to prevent or reduce stress responses in situations that are not dangerous by thinking differently and by monitoring and reducing body tension. It also includes identifying and taking some small steps to change some environmental stressors.

## **Identifying Stressors**

What is stressful for one person may be quite different from what is stressful for another. To select the most effective coping strategies, the first step is to identify the stressful events in our lives that we could better manage.

Think through a day recently in which you might have described yourself as “stressed out.” Perhaps at first you can’t imagine why you were feeling particularly tense, anxious or irritable. However, upon closer scrutiny (going through the day hour by hour), you begin to notice a series of difficult events that could have led up to your feelings.

Sometimes the events seem like such little things that you wouldn’t mention them if asked what had happened to put you in such a state. By examining or pinpointing the stressful events, however, you are in a better position to change the reactions you have and reduce your stress.

### **An Exercise to Identify Stress**

Imagine that you are wearing a miner's helmet, the kind with a light on the front. Imagine that the light turns red when you are feeling under stress, green when you are relaxed. Then imagine yourself walking through a day with your helmet on and notice what happens.

*I'm sleeping deeply and my telephone rings and it jolts me out of bed; my red light goes on. As I reach for the phone, I notice that the clock has stopped, so my alarm didn't go off. I look at my watch and notice that I'm already half an hour late for work; my red light goes on again. The phone call is from my mother asking me to take her to the store today.*

*I agree but tell her that I'm running late now and can't talk. She is understanding and sweet; my green light goes on. I walk down the hall to the bathroom and stumble over Pat's skateboard and nearly fall; again the red light goes on. When I finish in the bathroom I notice that my son is playing with blocks and invites me to play with him, but I have no time for it. I speak shortly to him and he cries; my red light goes on. I can't find a clean sweater to wear and berate myself for not doing the wash last night; on goes the red light....*

As you can see, stressful events can be quite varied. Likewise, the coping strategies involved may be equally varied. Arranging the environment differently may prevent repetition of some events; relaxing or thinking about the situation differently may be the best way to cope with others

Sometimes when people begin keeping track of their stressful events, they begin to feel worse because they're focusing on the negative. If you notice this happening, try to get up and do something right after you write down stressors, so you can get your mind on other things. If you continue to feel more distressed, you may want to discontinue keeping track of stressors until you can do it with professional guidance.

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