

# Toolkit: Family Stress

**Family stress is a disturbance in the steady state of the family system.** The disturbance can emerge from the outside (e.g., war, unemployment, pandemic), from inside the family (e.g., death; divorce, illness), or both at the same time. Every family reacts different to stress, but some of the most common effects include:

- **Arguments and fighting**
- **Fatigue, health problems and general exhaustion**
- **Confusion (especially in children) about relationships with other family members**
- **More dependence on food, alcohol and other substances**

## Evaluate your lifestyle

Ask yourself: **How do I respond to stress?** Do I tend to overeat or engage in other unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking and drinking alcohol, when I feel stressed? In what ways can I change my coping mechanisms to be healthy? **Children model their parents' behaviors, including those related to managing stress.** Parents who deal with stress in unhealthy ways risk passing those behaviors on to their children.

## Communicate!

**If you notice that someone in your household looks worried or stressed, ask them what's on their mind.** Having regular conversations can help a family work together to better understand and address any stress factors.

## Create a healthy environment

**Your home, work space and social environment can influence your behaviour.** Altering that environment can help alleviate stress. For example, clean up a cluttered room or car. Clearing up your home space for the family is something you and your children can control.

## Don't forget to look after yourself

**When you and/or your family are experiencing stress, make a conscious decision to take care of yourselves.** Eat, have physical activity, and sleep enough. A healthy dinner followed by an activity with your family, such as walking, bike riding, playing catch or a board game, and topped off with a good night's sleep can do a lot to manage or to lessen the negative effects of stress.

## Change one habit at a time

**Changing behaviours usually takes time.** By starting with changing just one, you and your family are more likely to experience success, which can then encourage your family to tackle other challenges and to continue making additional healthy changes.

# Toolkit: Family Stress

## Sources and References

- **American Psychological Association**  
<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/managing-stress>
- **SCAN of Northern Virginia**  
<https://www.scanva.org/support-for-parents/parent-resource-center-2/family-stress/>
- **Ackard, D.M., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Story, M., & Perry, C. (2006).** "Parent-Child Connectedness and Behavioral and Emotional Health Among Adolescents." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, Vol. 30, pp. 59-66.
- **Aronen, E.T., Paavonen, E.J., Jallberg, M. F., Soininen, M. & Torrenen, J. (2000).** "Sleep and psychiatric symptoms in school-age children." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. 39, pp. 502-508.
- **Patrick, H. & Nicklas, T.A. (2005).** "A Review of Family and Social Determinants of Children's Eating Patterns and Diet Quality." *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, Vol. 24, pp. 83-92.