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Parents

Inside Parents

"Stress: The Healthy Way to Cope," by Melinda Blau, which begins on page 47, points out that it's impossible—and not even desirable—to eliminate all the stress we encounter as part of family life. While a life totally without stress would be exceedingly dull, there are some stresses—inflation, for one—that we can fight, or endure, but which we are unlikely to cure single-handedly. Between these extremes, however, there is a range of sticky, upsetting situations, some of them soluble, but many of which preoccupy our thoughts and clutter up our lives to an unnecessary degree. One of the most common of the latter variety is worrying about what *they* will think. *They* usually refers to any authority who is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as sitting in potential judgment on you and your children.

They can, of course, be powerful forces; *they* includes policemen, school principals, judges, and health inspectors, and one is usually well advised to heed their advice. But *they* can also be the mother next door whose children are always dressed immaculately, while your offspring traipse around in grass-stained jeans. *They* can be your best friend who believes that all preschoolers should take a two-hour afternoon nap. And *they* can be your mother, who thinks it's reprehensible that your three-year-old refuses to eat a good, nourishing, delicious food like spinach.

When you consider all the *theys* in your life and begin to anticipate and to fret about their expectations of your family's behavior, you can end up feeling a great deal of pressure to measure up to them. That's where you should draw the line. After all, as long as your

family is happy, healthy, reasonably well adjusted, and not in violation of the laws of the land, there's really no good reason why Great Aunt Mildred's standard of behavior should be yours.

When you find yourself upset by others' advice, though, it often makes sense to sit down and take stock of what your expectations for your family really are. If your mother's comment on the spinach left on your son's plate reminds you that he is existing on a steady diet of junk food, your concern for his health may prompt you to change his eating habits. That's a worthwhile reaction to stress. And if cleaner-than-clean is a high priority for you, you can always lessen the guilt you feel by taking appropriate action. And if, for instance, you see no reason for your child to be encouraged to nap, then forget it; why on earth should someone else's standards dictate how your family lives?

If you can separate real stress from unnecessary pressures, you will have more energy to devote to coping with the adjustments all of us make to adapt, change—and grow.

Beginning with our July issue, Judith Ripp's valuable movie reviews will become a three-times-a-year feature in Parents. Instead of monthly coverage, we will now be able to offer up-to-date reviews in greater depth, plus reports on trends in children's entertainment and suggestions for worthwhile television viewing. ©

Elizabeth Crow

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FEATURES

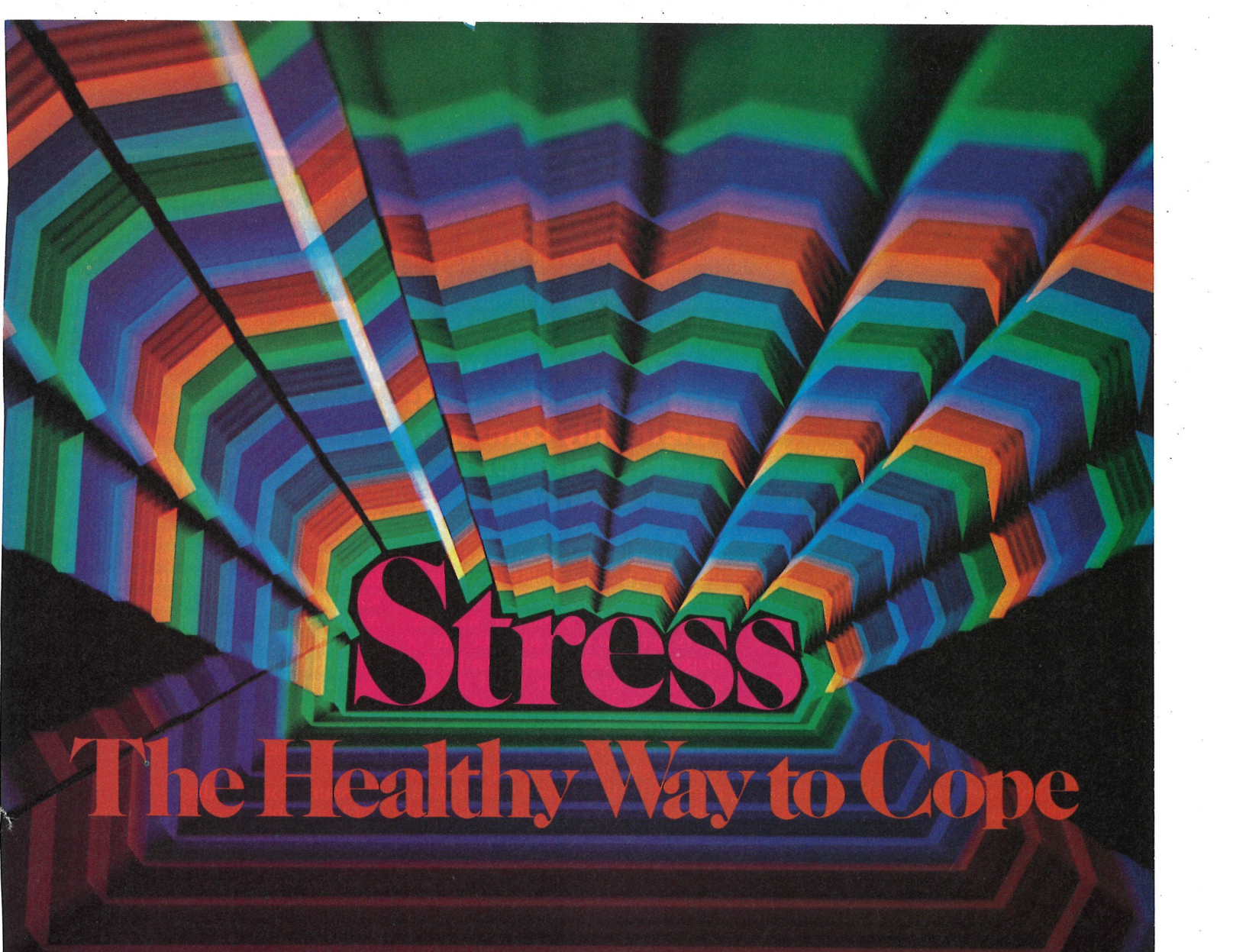
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Stress: The Healthy Way to Cope

By Melinda Blau

The pressures of modern life take an enormous toll on the mental and physical well-being of you and your kids. Psychiatrists offer ways to ease the strain on your family.

You, Your Child,
And Stress
A HEALTHY WAY TO COPE



Stress

The Healthy Way to Cope

By Melinda Blau

Photographed by Henry Ries

At age 35, Ellen Leigh has reached an important turning point in her writing career: editors are now calling *her*. Then again, so is everyone in her family. Her husband, Michael, involved in the demands of his own career advancement, complains that she's "always working." The family has just moved into a new three-times-as-large apartment, and the children, ages seven and ten, express their anxieties, too. "It's good that the kids are sharing their feelings about school, making friends, and navigating the neighborhood," Ellen says. "But it's a daily psychodrama. Who worries about stress on me?"

In varying degrees, everyone is under stress. But parents get it from all sides: personal growth causes stress; involvement in, or breaking away from, a marriage causes stress; being part of a family—putting up with everyone else's stress—causes stress.

Stress: the human response to any demand of life.

Dr. Hans Selye, the dean of stress research, defines stress as the human response to any demand of life, to anything that causes readjustment. Despite its connotation, stress itself is not always harmful, nor is it necessarily caused by negative factors. A strong physical attraction to another person can be as stressful as a nasty interchange. That's why the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale, a checklist of 43 major life events that involve significant amounts of stress (see "Test Yourself for Stress" on the next page), includes such joyful circumstances as the birth of a child and outstanding personal achievement along with obviously stressful crises such as death and divorce. The common denominator for all of them is change. Good or bad, important or incidental, any

event that requires change or adaptation to new circumstances can also cause stress.

The consequences of stress run the gamut from productive to debilitating. Controlled and understood, stress is the lifeblood of creation, the extra "edge" that enables human beings to reach their full potential. In fact, all of the great cultures of the world have been based, ultimately, on positive, creative reactions to stress. At the other extreme, stress overload—too many changes in too short a time—can have negative physical and mental effects.

The physical signs of overload may be subtle at first: palpitations, shortness of breath, trembling, nausea, constant fatigue, muscle aches, cold sweats. Also, there may be uncontrollable bursts of anger, fits of crying, forgetfulness, unexplained irritability, or vague feelings of discontent.

Unchecked, these minor complaints become more serious and can lead to migraine headaches, asthma, ulcers, hypertension, heart problems, and even mental illness.

Our response to emergencies: fight or flight.

Doctors can only partly explain how stress activates organic changes in the body. Many link the phenomenon to the "fight or flight" mechanism, the body's automatic response to emergencies. Like our cave-dwelling ancestors facing the threat of wild animals, our minds and bodies prepare for a challenge: the pulse quickens as the heart begins to pump faster; muscles tighten, ready to swing into action; perspiration increases; digestion stops; blood vessels in the extremities clamp down. Once the danger has passed, everything returns to a relaxed state.

The trouble is in today's world the "wild animals" keep coming. You can't run from contemporary problems, such as inflation, and you can't kill them. Our "dangers" are neither as clear-cut nor as easily remedied as those faced by primitive humans.

Although it's difficult to predict the point at which stress becomes distress or explain why some individuals are better equipped to cope than others, Dr. Kenneth Greenspan, director of the Laboratory and Center for Stress Related Disorders at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center

"Stressful events can be good or bad; their only common denominator is change."

in New York City, theorizes that "the difference between expectation and the perception of reality determines how much stress you feel."

For example, a mother who expects her two-year-old to be out of diapers by a certain time may be disappointed when her child doesn't comply. If she doesn't readjust her expectations, she will become stressed, worrying that her child is "slow"; she may even apply undue pressure on the child. A similar situation can occur between parents and

children of any age.

Since women generally spend more time with their children than do men, they are more likely to be victims of the pressure to be "good" parents. Dr. Greenspan sees mothers with migraines and ulcers, in agony over "doing the right thing." These women, says Greenspan, are the victims of the "myth that the mother is responsible for how the child 'turns out.' It's not uncommon for a woman to feel guilty and torn because there's a huge gap between her socially determined expectation of herself in the role of mother and the reality of who she is as a person."

Of course, men are stressed by the demands of their traditional roles, too: the pressure of bettering or at least maintaining their family's economic status; the destructive and alienating side effects of a "macho" ethic that equates emotional expression with weakness; and the threat of charting a course through the stormy, unfamiliar seas of raised female consciousness.

Pressures on children.

Clearly, the journey through adulthood is difficult for both sexes, especially in our rapidly changing times. And what about children? With mothers and fathers grappling with personal needs, struggling to redefine roles and relationships, striving for some semblance of security, who's taking care of their needs? Jean Schwartz—a psychologist who is writing a book on stress in children with her husband, Dr. Gary Schwartz (to be published later this year by W. W. Norton)—says that no one is. In fact, Ms. Schwartz paints a very dismal picture of what she calls "the hopeless generation."

"It's almost impossible for kids to prepare themselves for the future," she says. "Rules change too quickly; increased mobility makes it difficult to maintain close ties. One boy I interviewed counted 75 babysitters in eight years!"

Ms. Schwartz reports that many children are acutely aware, and often quite understanding, of the pressures on their parents. "But they're desperately looking for someone to talk to. The most common complaint is 'My parents never have time.' For many of them, I was the first adult willing to listen."

Test Yourself for Stress

This is the Social Readjustment Rating Scale formulated by Drs. Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe. It includes one year's life events that would involve significant stress. If you score 150 points, or above, you may experience high levels of stress that can be associated with emotional and/or physical illness.

Life Event	Mean Value		
1. Death of spouse	100	arguments with spouse	35
2. Divorce	73	20. Mortgage over \$10,000	31
3. Marital separation	65	21. Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
4. Jail term	63	22. Change in responsibilities at work	29
5. Death of close family member	63	23. Son or daughter leaving home	29
6. Personal injury or illness	53	24. Trouble with in-laws	29
7. Marriage	50	25. Outstanding personal achievement	28
8. Fired at work	47	26. Spouse begins or stops work	26
9. Marital reconciliation	45	27. Beginning or ending school	26
10. Retirement	45	28. Change in living conditions	25
11. Change in health of family member	44	29. Revision of personal habits	24
12. Pregnancy	40	30. Trouble with boss	23
13. Sexual difficulties	39	31. Change in work hours or conditions	20
14. Gain of new family member	39	32. Change in residence	20
15. Business readjustment	39	33. Change in schools	20
16. Change in financial state	38	34. Change in recreation	19
17. Death of close friend	37	35. Change in church activities	19
18. Change to different line of work	36	36. Change in social activities	18
19. Change in number of		37. Mortgage or loan less than \$10,000	17
		38. Change in sleeping habits	16
		39. Change in number of family get-togethers	15
		40. Change in eating habits	15
		41. Vacation	13
		42. Christmas	12
		43. Minor violations of the law	11

**Ready, set, grow:
Dealing positively
with stress
can strengthen
family ties.**



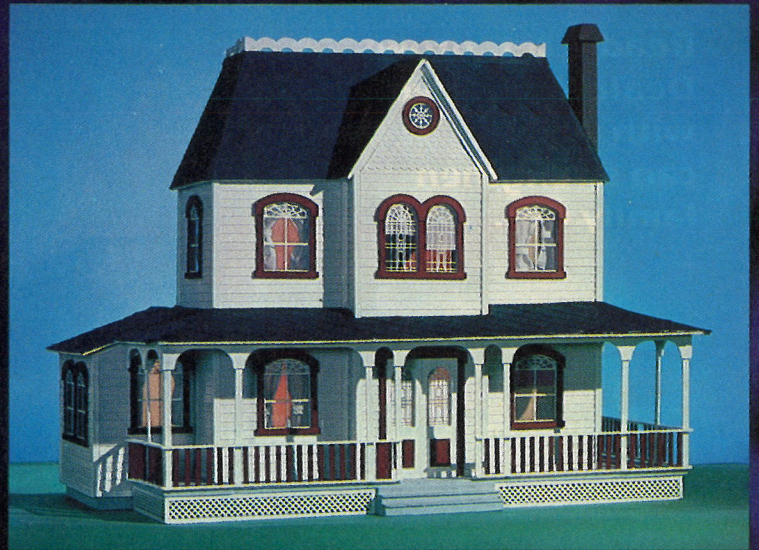
To be sure, many parents, preoccupied with their own concerns, feel overwhelmed and overburdened. They don't have the time or patience to acknowledge and deal with their kids' problems. Dr. Ronald Chez, an obstetrician at the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, in Hershey, Pennsylvania, observes that this often makes parents insensitive to their children's stress. "They say things like, 'You'll grow out of it,' or 'I didn't go to the prom either.'" And they also add stress by imposing their own needs instead of considering the child's (as in the case of the parent who wants the child to get into a "good" school because it reflects on family status).

Dr. R. Dean Coddington, professor of psychiatry at Louisiana State University Medical School, has developed stress scales for children. Not surprisingly, these scales include many of the same major life events that cause stress in adults. They also include items such as arguments with parents, becoming involved with drugs or alcohol, acquiring a visible deformity, suspension from school, and not being chosen for an extracurricular activity. As with similar adult scales, the Coddington checklists reflect only major life events. However, as with adults, a host of minor daily occurrences—such as an examination, an argument with a friend, or an encounter with a saleslady who "talks down" to him—can also add stress to a child's life.

Stress and illness.

Ms. Schwartz maintains that all this stress is taking its toll on children's health, and she cites the conclusions of several studies to prove her point: strep infections are four times more likely to cause illness after times of emotional stress; hypertension and ulcers, diseases once studied only in adults, have become childhood maladies as well; and more common ailments, such as colds and flu, have also been associated with stress. So have accidents. According to one Seattle study, it's not the risk-taking child who's most likely to get hurt; the strongest determinant is "life changes"—the more a child is subjected to, the more likely he is to have accidents.

"But people don't want to accept the idea of stress-related illness and accidents in children," Ms. Schwartz



"No matter how nice the new home is, moving is stressful for the entire family. But reestablishing familiar routines, inviting old friends over, and seeing favorite possessions can make everyone feel more comfortable."

says. "Adults labor under the misconception that childhood is idyllic and that children are resilient. They say, 'Kids don't have to worry about work or income tax. What kind of stress could they be under?'"

The fact is that every member of the family is likely to be under stress, which means that many families are in crisis—and, often, in poor health. Recognizing this, more and more physicians have begun to treat patients for stress.

Learning to relax.

At major medical facilities such as Johns Hopkins, Yale, The Menninger Foundation, and Columbia Presbyterian (which sponsors Dr. Greenspan's Laboratory and Center for Stress Related Disorders), the goal is to help patients control stress instead of becoming enslaved by it. "Mastery rather than victimhood" is the way Dr.

Greenspan puts it. But mastery isn't always easy because, as Dr. Greenspan explains, "Most people don't know the beginning signs of tension or what it feels like to relax." Unlike cars, we have no indicator lights to signal that our engines are overheating or that oil and gas are low.

Biofeedback equipment, used in a controlled setting by reputable practitioners, can help adults and children tune in to their minds and bodies and learn to give the "fight or flight" response a rest. Regular exercise or setting aside daily time for a favorite activity, whether it's jogging or reading or window-shopping, can accomplish the same result. The single most important aspect of stress control is taking time to relax.

Dr. Greenspan recommends that his patients relax twice a day, for twenty minutes each time. "At least once a day, though," he suggests, "give yourself a gift—of space, privacy, quiet. Just as long as it's something for yourself."

Dr. Greenspan also emphasizes that "relaxation and tension awareness must finally lead to a change of attitude. When you're under stress," he says, "focus on what you're learning about life, instead of judging yourself harshly for making a mistake



"The trouble with today's world is that you can't run away from problems like inflation and you can't kill them. Our 'dangers' aren't as easily defined or remedied as those faced by primitive humans."

or throwing up your hands in desperation."

To some degree, parents can reduce the stress in their children's lives by teaching the kids to do what they'd do for themselves: zero in on the causes and, whenever possible, do something to reduce the overload. After a move, for example, reestablishing familiar routines, finding places for favorite possessions, or inviting old friends for sleep-over dates can make children feel more comfortable in their new homes. Or, if teenagers feel overwhelmed by homework and extracurricular activities around exam time, parents can help them isolate the tasks they have to accomplish and rank them in order of importance.

Even when a problem doesn't have an easy solution, loving support from a parent makes it easier for a child to cope. One of the most important things a parent can do for the child who's being bullied at school, for example, is give him a little extra attention. Baking bread together or having an unexpected game of Frisbee are kindnesses that can make the cruelty at school more bearable.

It's also important for parents to be honest about their own feelings. "But don't just lay it on the kids," Dr.

Greenspan cautions. "The issue is *how* you say it: 'Mother is basically okay but feeling rotten today' is an acceptable way to talk to a child when you're upset. In a family especially, the more information that can be communicated in the most considerate manner, the better off everyone will be."

Keeping communication open.

Holding regular family meetings is one way to keep lines of communication open. Make it a policy not to interrupt one another and to start sentences with *I* instead of *you*. For example, the older sister who says, "Adam is a spoiled brat; he gets everything!" should be encouraged to talk about what she feels she's not getting, rather than to condemn her little brother.

Psychiatrist Sidney Lecker, director of Corporate Stresscontrol Services, Inc., in New York City, points out, "Children need to be understood as individuals; parents need to

spend time on a one-to-one basis with their child every day, even if only for twenty minutes." He cites the importance of studies that show that children who lack confidence are more likely to turn to drugs or alcohol. Along these lines, he underscores the impact of nighttime rituals: "Never let your child go to bed unhappy or angry."

We all need comfort and support. In a culture of nonstop demands, constant stimulation, and perpetual change, stress is a fact of life. You can't avoid or ignore it, especially if you're a parent. But you don't have to be its passive victim either. Slow down. Listen to your body and mind. Look at what's happening outside yourself. If there have been too many changes in too short a time, have you given yourself some quiet time to assimilate them? Consider where you are and where you're going—do you really want to be there? Don't be afraid to look inside at what you feel. Most important, talk about your feelings—and make sure your children do, too. They don't have to become a hopeless generation. And neither do you. ©

Melinda Blau is a New York-based freelance writer who often writes on psychology and health.