



Promoting Successful  
Relationships with  
Families

# 8.3

## THE ROLE OF STRESS ON FAMILY EXPERIENCE

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**Stress and the Individual**  
**Stress and the Family**





## THE ROLE OF STRESS ON FAMILY EXPERIENCE

*"If you are alive, there is stress in your life."*

*Hans Selye*



**S**tress appears to be the natural outcome of the demands that life places on individuals and families. These demands create strain or tension that is called **stress**. As a Direct Support Provider (DSP) it is important that you are aware of the impact of stress on both individuals and families. Knowing about the sources of stress and having adaptive responses to it will make you a more effective DSP. The two sources of family stress covered in this section are:

- ◆ Stress and the Individual
- ◆ Stress and the Family

## STRESS AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The individuals you support may, from time to time, experience stress or tension in their lives. The sources of stress can vary and they are unique to each individual. You will have to pay attention to what seems to “trigger” stress or tension in the person you support. It may be things like:

- ◆ Change of routine
- ◆ Introduction to new people or being around strangers
- ◆ Environments: new places, or places that elicit fear or insecurity

The person may respond to these situations in a variety of ways:

- ◆ Fear/Anxiety
- ◆ Emotional Responses
- ◆ Impulsive Behaviour
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Withdrawing

It is important to see these as natural responses to stress. The person acts in a manner that in some way “protects” them from the source of stress. This is sometimes called a “coping mechanism”. A coping mechanism is an attempt by the individual to control a situation he or she finds stressful.

As a DSP you may support people to learn positive coping mechanisms. These help the individual manage stressful situations in a positive manner. To just avoid every stressful situation is not an answer. Avoiding a situation that triggers stress may work in the short term but in the long term it can have negative effects on an individual's life and can lead to:

- ◆ **Social Isolation** – Individuals tend to stay home more and not participate in the community.
- ◆ **Lack of Social Competence** – Individuals lose the opportunity to acquire valued social skills. They may not learn how to act in public or use community resources (swimming pools, movie theatres, restaurants).
- ◆ **Diminished Social Network** - Individuals who are isolated will have fewer connections to friends and family.
- ◆ **Lower Self-Esteem** – Individuals will become more dependent and fail to show independence, choice, and self control.

The challenge for you as the worker is to support the individual to grow more comfortable and confident in stressful situations.



- ➔ When there are changes in the individual's life make sure the person understands the changes.
- ➔ Ensure that there is some continuity between the introduction of new people and the departure of people who are known to the person.

- ➡ Introduce individuals to new environments in a gradual manner. You may go to the new location for short periods of time or when it is less busy.
- ➡ Always remind individuals of their previous success at dealing with new and stressful situations.
- ➡ Always try to make new changes as positive an experience as possible. For instance, if you are going to new places have the individual accompanied by friends and/or other people they enjoy being with.

## STRESS AND THE FAMILY

As a DSP you must be aware that the family you partner with is also subject to stress. A good way to think about family stress is as:

- ◆ an imbalance between the demands on the family
- ◆ and the family's ability to manage those demands

These demands are called stressors. They are events that can “trigger” stress in a family. These include:

- ◆ **Financial Concerns** - lack of money, loss of job, additional expenses
- ◆ **Health Concerns** - illness in family, hospitalization
- ◆ **Transitions** - moving, children changing schools, death in family
- ◆ **Quality of Relationships** - marital satisfaction, lack of time for family members, lack of support from extended family

- ▶ **Special Circumstances** – alcoholism, poverty, conflict with the law
- ▶ **Specific Challenges** - a child not sleeping, a child crying for extended periods of time, a teen rebelling



It is important to remember that what is a stressor for one family may not be a stressor for another family. Some families may have developed positive coping mechanisms for the stress in their life. Other families may find the stress too much to deal with.

As a support provider you need to recognize that when a family is under stress and not coping well it may be less functional. You probably cannot change the situation but you can be a source of support.

- ▶ You can do your job well and be positive.
- ▶ You may also contact your supervisor for direction on how to support the family.

It is important that you do not assume the role of a “counsellor” with the family. While it is appropriate to listen, it is not appropriate to give advice on family problems. The following stories illustrate the difference between “giving advice” and “listening”.

### **Giving Advice -**

*Ted and Yolonda Wiebe have a teenage son named Joel. Joel has autism. He attends a local high school. Ted and Yolonda are upset about what they perceive to be a lack of interest in Joel's academic development. They have met with the school on several occasions and have not been able to resolve the situation. Yolonda Wiebe is so upset that she has trouble sleeping and is depressed. Recently she shared her anger and frustration with Joel's support provider, Tom Fredrick. Tom supports Joel on a casual basis and they spend time together in the community.*

*Tom listened to Yolonda and then gave her the following advice. He said that she should withdraw Joel from the high school and home school their son. He said that he knew of a family that was home schooling and that it was going very well.*





**What do  
You  
Think?**

***Here Tom crosses the line between advice and interference.***

*Did Tom try to solve the family's problem?*

*Did Tom impose his own views on the family?*

*Was Tom crossing the line from direct service work to being an advocate or counselor to the family?*

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**Listening**

*Ted and Yolonda Wiebe have a teenage son named Joel. Joel has Autism. He attends a local high school. Ted and Yolonda are upset about what they perceive to be a lack of interest in Joel's academic development. They have met with the school on several occasions and have not been able to resolve the situation. Yolonda Wiebe is so upset that she has trouble sleeping and is depressed. Recently she shared her anger and frustration with Joel's support provider, Tom Fredrick. Tom supports Joel on a casual basis and they spend time together in the community.*

*Tom listened to Yolonda. Tom commented that it sounded like a challenging situation for her and the family. He added that from his*

*perspective Joel was doing very well in the community and that he enjoyed spending time with Joel.*



**What do  
You  
Think?**

***Here Tom listens without imposing his personal values and opinions.***

*Did Tom cross any “lines” in this story?*

*Is listening to the mother in this situation an appropriate thing to do?*

*Is expressing empathy an appropriate listening response?*

In the above stories Tom was in a difficult situation. If he says too much he will cross the line between support provider and family advocate/ counselor. If Tom says nothing in response to Yolanda he may appear distant and uncaring.

**Helpful  
Hints**

*When supporting a family experiencing stress it is important to not try and “fix” the situation. Usually the situations are complex. They may involve family dynamics that the DSP is unaware of or larger systems (such as education, in the stories above). These types of issues often require either extended time to resolve, professional expertise, or an appropriate intervention, such as: counseling, mediation, or financial resources. Involvement in complex issues is beyond the role of the DSP.*

**So . . .**

Both the individual you support and his or her family may experience stress. The role of the DSP is to provide support and to maintain a positive relationship with the family and other important people in the person’s life.

## Resources

Gilbert, K. R. (Ed.) (2003). **Annual Editions: The Family. 2003/2004.**  
Guilford, CT: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.

Schaefer, N. (1999). **Does She Know She's There?** Markham:  
Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

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Resources