



Managing parenting stress

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The pressures of being a parent

With the New Year underway and the new routines, activities, and pressures this brings, I thought I'd share some information about stress - what it is, and how to manage it. This article looks at the stress that parenting involves, signs of stress, the effects of stress, and how to practise self-care and switching off.

This article was inspired by a seminar I attended by Dr Michael Maley, a U.S. based Bioenergeticist (he draws on Stephen Porges' Polyvagal theory if you want to find out more). It was also inspired by my recent (stressful) experience of acquiring a new (furry) family member!

Parenting stress

Parenting is a big job, like a paid job. In fact parenting is arguably more demanding because you don't get any sick leave, holiday pay, or flexible work options! It's also not common to have a job share arrangement, where you are equally sharing your parenting responsibilities with someone else. The term 'stay-at-home mum', as opposed to the outdated term 'housewife', highlights the occupational nature of parenting these days. While the demands of being a 'housewife' would also have been significant, the demands on stay-at-home parents today (whether a mother or father) are different and therefore require different interventions.

Being a stay-at-home parent is a time-consuming job and is emotionally, physically and intellectually challenging. However, it's still one that is fairly undervalued in society, and therefore it can be easy to feel you 'should' do 'more'. This can inevitably lead to having too much on and too much strain on your body, mind, and spirit. This can lead to stress, 'burn out', 'and rushing women's syndrome' (a term coined by Dr Libby Weaver if you want to find out more) and, worse still, can result in more serious health issues. This highlights the importance of seeing our own signs of stress and working out our own ways of coping in this ever-changing world.

What does stress look like?

For the purpose of keeping this article short and readable, I'll explain my interpretation of stress in a nutshell (and it's not intended to replace any medical advice!).

Sympathetic nervous system arousal

Our sympathetic nervous system helps us deal with stressful situations. There are actually different types of stress, including eustress and distress. Eustress is referred to as a 'good stress', it can give you a burst at times when you need it e.g. coping with a sick child or starting a new job. Distress can feel the opposite, like you don't have the resources to cope.

One theory about stress is that our body responds according to how we feel we can cope with a situation. For example if we think 'I can do this', the dominant chemical messenger in our body is noradrenaline and this helps us feel confident. This is eustress or your optimum zone, but eustress can turn into distress if we push ourselves too far. For example if we start to get tired and think 'I don't know what to do', our body will produce more adrenaline in order to cope. Adrenaline doesn't feel so good, the heart pumps faster, we sweat, and our pupils dilate. Furthermore, if we begin to think 'I can't do this' our body starts producing the hormone cortisol and we feel distressed.

Liken stress to porridge (based on Stephen Porges' Porridge theory) – it's either just right, too hot or too cold. If it's just right, you're in your optimum performance and arousal zone. If it's too hot i.e. from too extreme or prolonged eustress, you can become hyper-aroused or in 'fight or flight' mode. If it's too cold i.e. prolonged distress, you can become hypo-aroused or 'frozen'.

Stress in action

Take for example, bringing home a new family member – whether it's of the human or furry variety. Your increasing attention and interest is on the rise when you bring baby home. You start researching and googling everything there is to know about parenting a baby. You feel excited and want to try so many different ways of doing things – you like to feel a sense of control and accomplishment. You can do this! You start decorating the baby's room; you buy some different, more educational, toys. You are thinking fast, moving fast, and feeling high. This is eustress at work – things couldn't be better, you could take on any problem!

But things start to change. Unfortunately you have a rough nights sleep because the baby wakes several times. Then you find yourself waking up in the early hours, worrying about whether the baby will wake! You wake up with butterflies. Your reserves are down because of the running around and overthinking you have done. Your brain feels flooded with information and you're finding it difficult to make decisions now. You still try googling, but this time you are researching how to fix the problems you're experience. You start

to feel out of control, your thoughts are muddled, and your confidence in your coping is decreasing. You're feeling distressed.

The pendulum swings too far, you feel too fast now, too jittery, and you can't sit down – there are jobs to do everywhere. You even find yourself repeating jobs, because once is not good enough. Nothing feels good enough. You go even faster but then, all of a sudden, you want to flee, because it all feels too much. Your arousal is too high and your performance is down. Without enough support and resources, you feel yourself and your energy drop. You now feel like you're withdrawing.

The effects of stress

The sympathetic nervous system is essential when we are in danger. However, after prolonged exposure to cortisol and adrenaline, we can end up in a chronic stress state, where we react to non-threatening situations as if they *are* threatening. So while the 'high' of hyper-arousal can be quite seductive and useful for short bursts, we have to be aware that it's not sustainable for too long. Learning to see your early signs of distress can show you when to activate a different, more constructive response to keep you primarily in your optimal zone.

Stress prevention

A good way of preventing the fall (hypo-arousal) off the high (hyper-arousal) is to plot how you feel on a continuum. First notice how you are feeling and rate it on a scale from -10 (being hypo-arousal) and + 10 (being hyper-arousal). Between -5 and +5 is your optimum zone. On hyperarousal your signs might be feeling overwhelmed, being forgetful, experiencing disrupted sleep, feeling tight in your tummy, chest, back or shoulders. Your signs on hypo-arousal might be feeling low and hopeless.

When you know how you prefer to feel, then you can figure out what helps you maintain that feeling and set your limits to protect that feeling. If we apply the example about the baby that I used earlier, we could have had a discussion early on with our partner/family member/support person about how to share responsibilities of childcare, including the decision-making. We could have asked for help early on and stated our limits i.e. no less than six hours sleep in a 24 hour period and how to make that work e.g. possibility of someone else settling the baby or getting up in the morning to the baby so that we can sleep in. You may even want to set your own limits about time you spend googling!

Keeping yourself in your optimum zone for most of the time means you can be connected to the world around you, engaged with people around you, and aroused enough for optimum performance. And if your fight or flight instinct kicks in, because of a threat, it should be able to do its thing and recover quickly because your parasympathetic nervous system kicks in, indicated by yawning and feeling relaxed.

Stress management

Knowing what you need to keep you in your optimum zone is ideal, but if you do find yourself in a state of either high or low arousal, this management strategy might help:

B – Breathe – five seconds into your belly, and seven seconds out until you feel a bit better.

A – Allow the feelings in your body; accept that they are here temporarily.

N – Notice what the sensations feel like; are they in your chest, your tummy or your head?

D – Discard the ‘what ifs?’ and the ‘I cant’s’, replace with ‘I can handle this’.

D – Draw or write - subconsciously i.e. free flowing writing or drawing.

Switching off

Here are some other tips that might help to ‘switch off’ so you can prevent and manage stress:

- **Brain-break** – don’t make any decisions right now, schedule them for later.
- **Remove unwanted distractions** – put your phone on silent when you want a break, and check your phone when you are ready.
- **Constructive thoughts** – remove the ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’ in your vocabulary, replace with ‘coulds’ and ‘wants’.
- **Check your perception of a task** – instead of thinking ‘I can’t’, ask yourself what you want and what you need, for example more knowledge and resources, more support, more strength.
- **Ask yourself what you need right now**, and what you feel like.
- **Write or draw** your thoughts and feelings.
- **Create constructive projects** – something that will give you some intellectual stimulation, something creative, social, physical and relaxing.
- **Ask for help and talk to trusted others** – it’s not a sign of weakness but rather a sign that you are strong enough to protect your limits.

Extra support

If you would like some extra help with developing new skills or looking at other aspects of your well-being, then PND Wellington’s Counselling service can help. Just see our contact details below. However if you feel unsafe then it’s important to get immediate help from your doctor or emergency.

A word from the author...

I am Emma Heaney-Yeatts, PND Wellington's Lead Counsellor and Extension Manager. I am a mum of two young boys. I'm a fully qualified Counsellor and also have an honours degree in Education. I use Interactive Drawing Therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Client Centred Practice in my work with clients.

Wellington is so fortunate to have a new and in-demand free/low cost counselling service for parents who are finding it difficult to adapt to pregnancy, or life with a baby. You may or may not identify with the term PND, it does not matter - our service will have something that suits you.

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