



Module 03:

STRESS MANAGEMENT

STRESS MANAGEMENT

This module includes the following sections:

- › Key Messages
 - › Helping Your Child Recognize Stress
 - › Tips from Families for Managing Stress
 - › Activities for Managing Stress
-

Every child and youth experiences stressful events in their lives. While not all stress is bad, it's important to be able to recognize and take action when stress starts to have negative effects on your child's thoughts, feelings, or behaviour. Effective stress management can lead to better physical and mental health for the whole family.



Key Messages

1.

Explore what your stressors are and how you react to stress



It's important for your child to be aware of what makes them feel stressed, and how they react to stress. Once you know this, your family can look for ways to manage the stressful situations. A activity sheet on recognizing stressors (*Stress In My Day*) can be found in the 'Tools & Resources' section.

2.

Different stress management strategies will work for different families



There are many different strategies that your family can try. These include relaxation strategies such as deep breathing or yoga, cognitive strategies like changing the way you think, and behavioural strategies such as problem solving or time management. Explore different strategies to find out what works for your family, and try out the different resources in the 'Tools & Resources' section.

3.

How you think changes the way stress affects you



The way you think about your challenges can make a big difference in how much stress you experience. When you feel stressed, try to 'reframe' the way you think about the situation so that you are thinking about it in a more balanced way.

4.

Stress affects the whole family



As with any illness, taking care of a child or youth with a mental health challenge can be hard on parents/caregivers and other members of the family. It is important that families be sensitive to how stress affects them. Some strategies that parents and caregivers in B.C. have found helpful can be found in the 'Tips from Families' section of this module.

Helping Your Child Recognize Stress

Talk with your child about what it feels like when they are stressed, and what makes them feel stressed. Some younger children might understand words like 'worried' or 'upset' better than 'stress'. You could ask them how stress affects their:

- › Body (e.g. muscles that hurt, headache, upset stomach)
- › Mood (e.g. irritable, bad mood)
- › Thoughts (e.g. negative thoughts, difficulty paying attention)
- › Behaviour (e.g. restlessness)

In the 'Tools & Resources' section, we've included a *Stress in My Day* activity sheet for your child. This can help them keep track of what makes them feel stressed. Once your child knows what makes them stressed and how they feel when they're stressed, your family can look for ways to manage the stress (some ideas and activities can be found in this module).



Tips from Families for Managing Stress

These tips have been developed by families, for families through a series of focus groups across B.C. Keep in mind that not all tips are appropriate for all families – if you have questions about a specific concern, talk to your family doctor or other health care professional.

Tips for Children and Youth

Relaxation strategies

- › Listen to relaxing music
- › Practice relaxation exercises such as deep breathing (see the 'Activities' section in this module for more information)
- › Get out into nature with your family
- › Read a book, or read together as a family



Cognitive strategies (changing the way you think)

- › Try changing your 'red' thoughts to 'green' thoughts (see the 'Activities' section in this module for more information)
- › Try thinking about your strengths and resources (e.g. thinking about a time you did something well or accomplished a task)
- › Think about and write down all of the positives in your life, like people, things or talents. This can stop you from dwelling on negatives

Behavioural strategies (changing what you do)

- › Try not to over schedule activities. Too much activity can be stressful on the whole family
- › Write your worries down in a journal (see the 'Activities' section in this module for more information)
- › Be physically active
- › Practice problem solving (see the 'Tools & Resources' section for a problem solving activity sheet)

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

- › Remind yourself that when your stress level goes down, kids respond positively
- › Give yourself permission to take time for yourself:
 - Take time for a cup of tea
 - Go for a walk or a run
 - Socialize with friends
 - Get back to hobbies
- › Attend support groups for managing stress, or talk to family/friends about your stress
- › Appreciate time spent with your children
- › Spend time reconnecting with your spouse/partner
- › Have consistency across caregivers
- › Loosen expectations of your child – for example, don't feel they need to be on the honour roll at school or participate in every sport
- › Try not to use other children or youth as a standard for measuring your child's successes

Resiliency is the ability to use one's strengths to deal with life's challenges and obstacles.

For more information:

<http://able-differently.org/resiliency/>

Activities for Managing Stress

1. Reframing Thoughts: Red & Green Thoughts

'Reframing thoughts' means thinking about a stressful situation in a different way to give it new meaning. For example, if we think of "problems" as "challenges", the way we think about the situation can change to something which can be solved.

You can also reframe your thoughts by finding the positives in a situation. Looking for positives doesn't mean you gloss over negatives. You simply notice positive aspects of the situation as well, and add them to your thoughts. It might be helpful to think about your thoughts as 'Red' thoughts and 'Green' thoughts.

Red and Green Thoughts

Red thoughts are thoughts that are worrisome, negative, pessimistic or unhelpful. Red thoughts are all the negative things we think about when faced with an issue or event. Some examples of red thoughts are:

- > 'I can't ...'
- > 'I'm no good at ...'
- > 'Nobody likes me'



Everyone has red thoughts but the idea is to have them less often. Red thoughts can also be changed into green thoughts.

Green thoughts are those thoughts which are helpful, powerful, positive and optimistic. The goal is to help your child think these kinds of thoughts more often. Some examples of green thoughts are:

- > 'I will do my best'
- > 'My teacher can help me'

Green thoughts need to be **realistic**. They do not mean we are lying to ourselves. Green thoughts don't always make you feel **good**, but they can make you feel **better**, especially in difficult situations.

Thinking green thoughts helps children and youth feel more confident. They can also help to manage your child's fears and worries.

Next time you hear your child saying a 'red' thought aloud, ask them to come up with a 'green' thought instead. We have included a *Learning to Think Green Thoughts* activity sheet in the 'Tools & Resources' section. In addition, an interactive healthy thinking tool can be found at: <http://keltymentalhealth.ca/healthy-living/healthy-thinking/>

The 'reframing thoughts' activity is taught in the "FRIENDS for Life" program. This is a school-based program shown to be effective in building resilience and reducing the risk of anxiety disorders in children. It teaches children how to cope with worries and equips them with tools to help manage difficult situations.

For more information about the "FRIENDS for Life" school program, visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/friends.htm

There is also a free "FRIENDS For Life Parent Program", which is available online from: http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/friends_parent.htm

2. Deep Breathing (Relaxation Exercise)

Deep breathing (or 'belly breathing') is one of the easiest and quickest ways to relax, because it can be done anywhere and at anytime. Try explaining deep breathing to your child as a way to relax their brain and muscles.

The best time to try this activity for the first time is when your child is feeling relatively calm. Sit down with your child and explain that you're going to teach them a new type of breathing.

Ask them to put a hand on their stomach and feel their belly move in and out as they breathe. Make sure that they are standing or sitting up straight. Have them take a deep, slow breath, then tell them to slowly breathe it out through their mouth.

Once their breathing has slowed, tell them that you're going to breathe in for a longer time – for the count of six (you can either count for them while they breathe, or you can breathe with them while counting with your fingers). Some younger children may find a count of six too difficult; you can start with a count of three and gradually stretch it out.

After you've practiced this a few times, introduce the last step: slowing your exhale. Kids tend to want to let the air "explode" out after a big inhale. Practice exhaling to a count of six or even eight with them.

Another deep breathing exercise can be found on the *Quick Ways to Relax* resource in the 'Tools & Resources' section.

3. Problem Solving

Problem solving can help to decrease stress once it has already happened, and can also help to prevent stress from happening in the first place. Five simple steps to problem solving are:

1. Choosing the problem
2. Understanding the problem
3. Coming up with different solutions
4. Comparing the solutions
5. Finding the best solution and putting it into action

A problem solving activity sheet can be found in the 'Tools & Resources' section.