

Parenting: Being Supermom Stressing You Out?

Mothers are the world's best jugglers: family, work, money—they seem to do it all. However, all that responsibility can often leave moms feeling overstretched and stressed out. According to a 2006 survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), women are more affected by stress than men and report engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as comfort eating, poor diet choices, smoking, and inactivity to help deal with stress. The same survey showed women report feeling the effects of stress on their physical health more than men. With Mother's Day fast approaching, it's a good time for moms and their families to recognize the importance of addressing stress and managing it in healthy ways.

“How a mother manages stress is often a model for the rest of the family,” says APA psychologist Lynn Bufka, Ph.D. “Other family members will imitate her unhealthy behavior.”

Women are also more likely to take on the high-anxiety role of health care manager for the family. APA 2006 survey results indicate that stress is higher among family health care decision makers—17 percent of people who report being the primary health care decision makers are very concerned about stress versus 11 percent of those whose spouse or partner takes care of these matters—and that women disproportionately serve that role for their families (73 percent versus 40 percent of men).

“It's particularly stressful to be the family's health manager, making health care decisions for yourself, your children, and possibly aging parents,” says Bufka. “People who handle stress in unhealthy ways may alleviate symptoms of stress in the short term, but end up creating significant health problems over time, and, ironically, more stress.”

APA offers these strategies to help mothers manage stress:

- Understand how you experience stress — Everyone experiences stress differently. How do you know when you are stressed? How are your thoughts or behaviors different from times when you do not feel stressed?
- Identify stressors — What events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to your children, family health, financial decisions, work, relationships or something else?
- Recognize how you deal with stress — Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors to cope with the stress of motherhood. Is this a routine behavior, or is it specific to certain events or situations? Do you make unhealthy choices as a result of feeling rushed and overwhelmed, such as stopping for fast food while running errands or picking up your kids? Put things in perspective—make time for what's really important. Prioritize and delegate responsibilities. Identify ways your family and friends can lessen your load so that you can take a break. Delay or say no to less important tasks.

- Find healthy ways to manage stress — Consider healthy, stress- reducing activities—taking a short walk, exercising, or talking things out with friends or family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Don't take on too much at once. Focus on changing only one behavior at a time.
- Ask for professional support — Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to persevere during stressful times. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist who can help you manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

“Mothers often put their family needs first and neglect their own,” says Bufka. “It’s okay to relax your standards—don’t put a lot of pressure on yourself to have the “perfect” house or be the “perfect” mother. No one expects you to be Superwoman.”

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