

Stress Managing Strategies

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We know it intuitively, but new research by PWS experts Janice Forster, M.D., Linda Gourash, M.D. and Marjorie Royale confirms it: *stress is significantly higher among parents and other caregivers of people with PWS than it is in the population at large.* It's imperative, then, that we utilize strategies that will reduce and manage our high levels of stress so that we have adequate energy to sustain a calm and neutral response to our child with PWS, so that we are emotionally available to *all* of our children *and* spouse, and so that we stay healthy and enjoy the same high quality of life we work so hard to provide to our family. Such is the focus of this article.

We tend to think of "stress" as an evil to be avoided at all costs. Stress, however, is an unavoidable fact of life. Just as sad, fearful or worrisome events cause stress, so too do exciting and wonderful things: marriage, new home, new job, major purchase, pregnancy, births, beginning school, graduating. It isn't, then, that we must keep stress away, but rather that we must learn effective ways to reduce and manage it.

Physiological Reactions to Stress

Stressors cause physiological changes in the body. When the brain perceives a stressor, it first signals the release of the chemicals epinephrine and norepinephrine, and then the release of cortisol and other hormones. The body is put on heightened alert and prepares for a change in behavior (i.e., fight or flight). After the stressor is gone, the body returns to its pre-stress state.

Chronic stress, such as is typically experienced by care providers of persons with PWS, sensitizes the stress system, making it *more* responsive to stress. The result is the system *over responds* to new stressors, trapping us in a vicious cycle of perceiving any new stressor as SEVERE, to which we're *more* likely to attempt to manage it utilizing a familiar, but often unhealthy, stress-reducing strategy, which ends up placing more stress on our body, and on it goes. The long-term potential outcome? Depression, anxiety, hypertension, eating disorders, a tendency to colds and other infections, ulcers, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal diseases,

migraine headaches, asthma episodes, some cancers, and even an acceleration in the aging process.

Emotional Reactions to Stress

Some people are perpetual Worry Warts who tend to feel more anxious the calmer things become. Others always seem to remain unruffled even in the midst of an obviously sinking ship. While everyone has an emotional reaction to stress, the degree of stress felt is individualized and dependent upon various factors including the complexity of our care taking responsibilities, the quality of our support network, the demands of our daily responsibilities, and our physical health. Whether you're a Worry Wart, Cool as a Cucumber, or somewhere in between, your first reaction to a stressor will probably be fairly consistent and marks a starting place to begin improving your stress management techniques: Do you tighten up, experience back pain, tummy aches, headaches? Get irritable, impatient or angry? Do you experience a steady stream of negative thoughts? Tend to cry, ignore or avoid the problem, or just give up? Do you reach for a cigarette, drink or use some other drug? Eat when you're not hungry? None of these stress managing strategies is necessarily inherently "bad" or unhealthy in and of itself - unless it's the *only* strategy used to manage stress.

How to Manage Stress

There's actually a lot we can do reduce and manage stress. Below is a list of various stress management strategies. Some strategies won't be a good fit, some may work only occasionally, and some will work very successfully. Give yourself a pat on the back for each one you already utilize, and consider adding a few more to your stress-managing cache.

- **Controlled Breathing:** One of my favorite in-the-moment stress reducing techniques is slow, measured breathing. Breathe in normally through your nose and exhale slowly out of your mouth to a count of four. Relax your shoulders. Repeat 4-5 times and notice your mind and body begin to relax.
- **Thought Management:** Another effective in-the-moment technique to use during those "I-can't-take-this-anymore-or-I'll-explode" moments is to softly tell yourself to "Stop. Breathe. Relax. It's ok. I will get through this" or "Stop. Breathe. Relax. There's nothing I

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can do about the traffic. I'm doing the best I can." Keep things in perspective. Maintain realistic expectations. Don't "sweat the small stuff." Remind yourself that a calm journey is far more important than a punctual but stress-filled destination. Guided Imagery can be used anywhere you have even two minutes: control your breathing, relax your body, and imagine scenes that are relaxing and calming. Other long-term tools include meditation, yoga, and Tai chi.

- **Time Management:** My son's Karate teacher tells his students that the best defense to an attack is to move out of the way. The same principle can apply to stress management: the best defense to stress is to avoid it! Prioritize. Avoid over scheduling whenever possible. Don't over commit or overextend yourself - or your family members. Give yourself plenty of time to transition or travel from place to place. Building in more transition time will place less stress on everyone.
- **Personal Boundary Management:** Having a child with PWS challenges us to think ahead and anticipate potential problems. Acknowledging our own personal boundaries and then assertively (not aggressively) protecting them is healthy, even and especially when interacting with our kids. It's ok to share that today you're feeling extra tired and therefore need extra quiet time. It's ok to tell your friend that you really can't help out today because you've made other commitments (to yourself!). When at all possible avoid or limit the amount of time you spend with people who stress you out. As Clint Eastwood advises, know your limitations. If you're not good at calmly helping your child with her homework, have someone else do it.
- **Exercise & Diet:** One of the best long-term strategies against stress is to give yourself regular physical activity. Exercise releases wonderful chemicals in your brain that restore

and heal the mind and body. Fifteen to twenty minutes a day for 3-5 days a week will make a huge difference in how you feel and how you manage your stressors. I know, twenty minutes a day of anything focused on just you is a luxury, but we need to create pleasant daily physical activities for our child/adult child anyway! Incorporate a daily walk, or wake up 20 minutes earlier in the morning or go to bed 20 minutes later so that you can workout to an exercise DVD. When you get creative you'll find plenty of opportunities for physical activity. And of course maintaining a healthy diet gives your brain and body the fuel they need to manage stress better.

- **Sleep:** Adequate, consistent sleep is vital to a healthy body and makes it much easier to manage stressors. For many people, especially those whose child awakens several times during the night, it is very difficult to get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep necessary to recharge the brain revitalize the body. But without adequate sleep, we are less able to calmly manage even the tiniest stressor.
- **Support:** If you're lucky enough to have a good support system, use it! People with a healthy support network consisting have fewer stress-related symptoms and manage stress better.
- **Therapeutic Intervention:** It takes intelligence to recognize when we've done all we can and it's just not enough, and it takes courage to reach outside ourselves to ask for help. If you don't have the luxury of a good support system and you're feeling overwhelmed with stress, find a good professional. Many psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, even some clergy are trained in stress management techniques. Counseling can be brief or longer-term depending upon the need.

When in the midst of a stressor we tend to forget any potential new management options, so until they're automatically incorporated into your daily life it may be helpful to post some of these stress-managing options on your frig or in your car as an in-the-moment reminder. I wish you successful stress-managing strategies that carry you through the holidays... and throughout your lifetime!