

Families Can Build Strengths, Cope with Stress during Tough Times

Layoffs, state budget cuts and overall economic uncertainty can chip away at a family's ability to cope. Just when they need each other's support the most, stress may push family members apart.

Someone who is having trouble dealing with a tough situation may feel that it's not OK to ask for help, or that he or she has to be cheerful and not worry others. Family members may feel so involved in the problems themselves that they forget to really listen to each other.

Some stressors can't be changed, such as a layoff or illness. But families can use hard times to build their coping resources. The goal is to come through the crisis with their most valuable assets intact -- relationships, self-esteem and the ability to start over.

When stresses build from economic anxiety or loss, change or crisis, your family can be one of your most valuable resources for coping.

Strengthen Families during Tough Times

The ISU Extension specialist offers these ideas to strengthen families during tough times.

- Talk together about feelings, problems and solutions.
- Listen to every member. Fresh viewpoints can be valuable.
- Reassure children during a crisis, but don't hide problems.
- Find humor in little things, often.
- Do something fun together, often.
- Give recognition and compliments for small accomplishments.
- Use lots of hugs and touch.
- Support each other, but be open to help from others outside the family.

Resilient families can hit bottom, maybe again and again — but they keep climbing back up. They learn to cope with stress.

Frequently, the things that cause us the most stress are due to change and transitions we have to meet head on. Otherwise, the emotions will come out later as increased anxiety, illness or relationship problems.

Take time to keep relationships strong. If we are too busy to listen and appreciate each other we won't build the cohesiveness that helps hold us together in tough times.

There are no quick fixes for coping with stress. But it helps to take care of yourself. That means eating nutritious foods, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep.

In addition, look to the larger community. How long has it been since you talked with your neighbors or shared a quick work break? Is there something you can do for someone else in your community? Strength and resilience grow from sharing experiences with others.

Families and communities also can build on skills learned from past experience with hard times. Both mistakes and successes can be coping resources.

Publication Available

ISU Extension publication “All About Stress,” PM 1660A, explores various sources of change and offers a checklist of physical symptoms of stress. It is part of ISU Extension’s “Stress -- Taking Charge” publication series. The publication explains how families can learn to live with inevitable stressors, suggests stress management strategies and offers guidelines for developing personal and family strengths. Iowans can download pdf files or order copies from the ISU Extension Online store, <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/>. Publications also are available from ISU Extension county offices.

Managing Tough Times

For more information on dealing with stress and economic uncertainty, see ISU Extension’s Managing Tough Times Web site, www.extension.iastate.edu/answers.