

Parenting: High Expectations, Dads and Stress

Parenting is difficult in today's fast-paced and demanding world, and it can take a toll on one's physical and emotional well-being. With equal sharing of parenting duties increasingly becoming the norm, many men (as well as women) are experiencing the pressure of being both a breadwinner and an active care giver. Father's Day is right around the corner—it is important to recognize the challenges dads face and figure out how dads can deal with the resulting stress.

According to a 2006 APA survey, forty-three percent of men are concerned about stress. Balancing both work and family life can leave many men feeling as if they're drowning in a sea of work, bills, and the responsibilities of being a father. "Men in particular respond to stress by feeling irritable, angry, and having trouble sleeping," says psychologist Ron Palomares, Ph.D. "This stress is, unfortunately, often dealt with in unhealthy ways, such as by smoking, drinking, and overeating."

Moreover, since fathers and mothers serve as role models for children, it is important to set a good example. "Children mold their behavior after that of their parents," says Palomares. "Thus, developing healthy responses to stress will be good for you, and, ultimately, good for your children."

APA offers these few strategies to help fathers manage stress:

- **Identify** — How do you know when you are stressed? What events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to your children, family health, financial decisions, work, relationships, or something else?
- **Recognize** — Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors to cope with work or life stress. Are you a restless sleeper or do you become easily upset and annoyed over trivial things? Is this a routine behavior, or is it specific to certain events or situations?
- **Manage** — Unhealthy reactions to stress are like taking the easy way out: consider healthy, stress-reducing activities like exercising or playing sports. Focus on the quality of time spent, not the quantity. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Put everything in perspective, think before you act or speak, and make time for what's really important.
- **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 entrenched, unproductive behaviors.

"No one expects you to be the perfect father. It is essential to maintain balance among what is "Superdad" fantasy and what are realistic and attainable aspects of fatherhood," Palomares asserts. "Stress management is not a race to the finish line—don't take on more than you can handle. Instead, set goals and focus on changing one behavior at a time."

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