

Managing Stress in Later Life Families

As adults grow older, they often dream of freedom to travel, new interests, economic comfort, and more time with family and friends. However, reality seldom matches expectations. The losses and gains of new roles can be stressors. Leaving a career may mean more freedom, but it also involves losses of challenging work, relationships, daily routine, or a sense of purpose. Family needs keep changing too, sometimes in unexpected ways.

After years filled with the challenging demands of family and employment, many retirees enjoy having time to pursue their interests. Some people, however, find they have too much time and miss the demands of the work world. It helps to develop structure for your time. Ask yourself these questions:

- What are the things I want to accomplish in the next month? Year?
- How do these goals translate into daily tasks or objectives?

Plan your day around the short-term objectives and soon you will have a new routine that gives structure to the day.

The new routine might include beginning or increasing your role as a community volunteer. Such activities can provide personal fulfillment and satisfaction while also benefitting the community. Volunteer roles give you a sense of purpose and allow you to use your skills in a meaningful way while maintaining regular contact with a variety of people.

Relationship with Spouse or Partner

Remember that a spouse or partner may not experience the same stressors or react in the same way to losses and gains.

Use the strength of your relationship as a resource when managing stress.

- Share your needs and feelings.
- Listen to your spouse or partner.
- Be flexible and willing to take some risks.
- Use what you've learned from the past.
- Plan activities you both enjoy.
- Schedule time apart for individual interests.

Rose isn't sleeping well. Retirement from her demanding job has been disappointing. "Relax," her kids say, "you deserve it." But Rose feels tense and worried about her future.



Her husband, Mel, retired for two years, doesn't seem interested in traveling and talks about finding a new job. Rose feels strange not working. Wasn't retirement supposed to be fun?

Loneliness, Grief and Stress

Loneliness is natural when you miss loved ones, leave your home, or lose your sense of purpose. How you think about your loneliness can affect how stressful it is for you. Waiting for someone to notice your sadness or blaming others isn't helpful.

Taking some action, no matter how small, allows you a sense of control. You may need to help people understand your situation. Reaching out to others, learning a new skill, volunteering your time – these are ways to ease the loneliness.

Grief is a normal response to the death of loved ones, long-term illness of a spouse, physical separation, or loss of cherished dreams. While these situations are different, they all result in losses that can cause severe stress. You may need assistance as you grieve.

- Ask for help from family, friends, or professionals.
- Accept support from others.
- Take special care of your health.
- Allow yourself as much time as you need.

Relationships with Adult Children

You don't ever stop being a parent. Disappointment, worry, or sadness about family members can seem overwhelming. It is important to let go of the need to solve an adult child's problems. Instead, focus on what you can do to show your support.

- Recognize that you cannot protect your family from pain.
- Keep communication open with your children and grandchildren.
- Find someone to talk to about your feelings.
- Set boundaries for what and how much you can do.

If you are a grandparent, value the role. Disagreements with adult children about your grandparenting are stressful, so talk with your children about their expectations. Long distance separation, conflicting responsibilities, or serving as a substitute parent are other sources of stress.

Health Changes and Stress

As a person ages, health changes may be a reality. You may feel trapped between what you want to do and physical limitations. It's painful to give up familiar things. Change is especially stressful when you feel others are choosing for you. It is important to share your feelings with family members. At the same time you want to accept their concerns for your health and well-being. Learn about resources for help and discuss options with your whole family.

As decisions are made, consider the consequences of your choices for you and your family.

Stress and conflict

An overload of daily demands and times of real crisis can cause tension in your family. You can take charge by resolving conflicts with others.

- Create a quiet time to talk. Conflicts can't be resolved when you're stressed for time.
- Ask each other's opinions—good ideas grow from listening to each other.
- Be empathetic. Try to understand how the other person feels.
- Listen well and be clear about your feelings.
- Work on one goal at a time. What do you want to do or change?
- Look for humor every day.
- Show appreciation to the people you care about.

Eat well. Be well.

Although no specific food can cure or alleviate stress, eating well to maintain your health and strength can help you feel your best. You can take charge by eating right.

- Follow a routine to eat meals and snacks.
- Share mealtimes with others.
- Focus on fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole-grain breads and cereals, and lean meats.
- Follow special diets if necessary for health issues.
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water each day.
- Build physical activity into your daily schedule.
- Visit MyPlate.gov for dietary guidelines.

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