

Whether mothers work or not, managing a household can be stressful. What problems do mothers face these days? We put some key questions to Carolyn Kee, Senior Psychologist at the Child Guidance Clinic, Institute of Mental Health.

the stress of motherhood

Q **What are the typical sources of stress for a mother?**
For both working and stay-home mothers, the following are common sources of stress:

Disagreement with spouse over parenting issues, household matters, financial matters and in-laws. Financial problems can include a low income, unemployment and debts.

Some worry about the children, how they do in school, if they mix with bad company or get into trouble with the law.

Working mothers may experience stress from problems at work, such as feeling unappreciated or unrewarded, conflict with colleagues, and unclear expectations from their bosses. Some may feel unsupported by their spouse/in-laws with respect to their work, and may be torn between work and their own or their spouse's expectations of them as a wife and mother. They may also feel pressured to leave their jobs for the sake of the family especially when problems arise within the family.

The other common thing that can stress working mothers is that they often have to rely on others to care

for their children and may find it difficult to ensure that their children experience the kind of caregiving or parenting that they want them to have. There may also be conflict between the working mother and the caregiver on caregiving/parenting styles and strategies. Some working mothers may feel displaced by the caregiver and compete with the person for their children's love and affection.

Stay-home mothers are not spared from stress either. They may feel isolated at home and overwhelmed by the multitude of domestic concerns such as childcare, housework and finances. Some are frustrated with the monotony of their days and find the work that they do mundane and unsatisfying. They may feel unappreciated and resent having to be financially dependent on their spouse.

Q **How can maternal stress affect a child?**
Stressed out mums may be less patient and tolerant with their children. They may tend to be more negative and critical in their behaviour. This may result in

more conflict and negative interactions between mother and child and cause the child stress. The child may also experience stress from having to constantly monitor his mother's emotional state and regulate his behaviour according to it.

When the child is faced with frequent criticism and negative feedback, he may develop a negative view of himself and the world around him, and this will reduce his ability to cope effectively with challenges in life.

Q **What are the signs that a child may be negatively affected by his mother's stress? What are the signs that someone is experiencing too much stress?**

The child may exhibit the following behaviour in addition to the symptoms described below: A deterioration in school performance, refusal to attend school, fearfulness, refusal to separate from mother (being clingy), and defiant behaviour.

Physical signs of stress include stomachaches, headaches, muscle tension, sweaty palms, grinding of teeth, and increased susceptibility to illness.

Behavioural signs include sleeping and eating disturbances, clumsiness, self-harm, violence, crying, sensitivity to criticism, withdrawal, avoidance, apathy, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, rigidity, tantrums, and quarrelsome behaviour.

Emotional signs include depression, low self-esteem, fear, anxiety, anger, irritability and frustration. Cognitive signs include confusion, poor attention and concentration, poor memory, and poor planning and organisation.

Q **How do mothers compare to fathers (or women vs men) when it comes to coping with stress?**

Women are more likely to admit to feeling stressed, to look towards their social support networks, and to seek help and comfort by sharing their troubles. Men are more likely to suppress their feelings and internalise their stress. They may seek to relieve stress by trying to "fix" the problem, by withdrawing, by engaging in physical activity, and in some cases, by drinking or smoking.

Q **Is there such a thing as positive stress? Can stress be beneficial and if so, how?**

Not all stress is bad. People need to experience some level of stress in order to feel challenged and stimulated. Without stress, life becomes mundane and boring.

Many people enter races or competitions precisely because they want to experience the challenge and stimulation that comes from pitting themselves against another, even though doing so can be stressful. When a person encounters

stress and copes effectively with it, her belief in herself is reinforced, she grows in self-confidence and becomes better equipped to cope with future challenges.

Q **How can one minimise the stress of parenting?**

These are some stress management techniques:

KNOW YOURSELF It is important to know what makes you susceptible to stress, such as unrealistic expectations, negative thinking, poor time management and specific behaviours or situations that annoy and upset you.

By being more aware of yourself, you will be better able to manage your stressors and find more effective ways of coping with them.

THINK POSITIVE Learn to recognise and change your negative or unhelpful thinking styles. Try to find more helpful ways to look at situations, and to replace negative thoughts with more positive ones.

SEEK BALANCE AND FLEXIBILITY Don't blow things out of proportion and try not to see things from a black-and-white or an all-or-nothing perspective. Be willing to look at other options and possibilities.

HAVE REALISTIC GOALS Setting clear goals for yourself and your child can help give you a sense of control and direction as a parent. However, it is important to set achievable goals so that you do not become frustrated or discouraged.

GET SUPPORT Surround yourself with supportive family or friends. Talk to people when you have problems. You will feel less alone and they may be able to help you find a solution.

GET A HIGHER FRAME OF REFERENCE Many studies suggest that having spiritual or religious beliefs can help to buffer stress and enable us to cope better with life's problems.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF Take care of your health by eating and sleeping well, exercising regularly and staying away from harmful habits such as smoking and drinking. When your body feels well, you have more energy to cope with stress.

Make time for yourself – for rest, leisure and relaxation. By having fun and taking care of your own emotional needs, you can be a happier and more patient parent.

MANAGE YOUR TIME WELL Organise your time and activities; prioritise and plan your day. Do not let things pile up and do not leave things to the last minute.

LEARN TO LIKE AND ACCEPT YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILD Be kind to yourself and learn to like and accept yourself in spite of your faults and weaknesses. As a parent, you will also need to know your child well, his strengths and weaknesses, and develop realistic expectations of your child. Acceptance of yourself and your child is key to achieving a more effective and enriching parenting experience. **YP**