

Overwhelmed by the Back to School Rush?

Whether it's the first day of kindergarten, returning from a long summer vacation or going to a new school, back to school time can be overwhelming for many parents and children and teens. As the summer comes to an end and the time to return to work or school draws near many Americans are likely to find their stress levels increase. The transition from August to September can test families' coping skills in dealing with adjustments such as new teachers, new classrooms and new schools as well as parents struggling with the return to hectic work schedules.

A 2006 APA Survey found that nearly half (47 percent) of Americans are concerned with the level of stress in their daily lives and those with children living at home were more likely to be concerned about stress than those without. Increased stress can push people toward using unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, comfort eating, poor diet choices, inactivity and drinking to manage their stress. Reliance on such behavior can lead to long-term, serious health problems.

“Returning to work after a vacation, transitioning your children to a new school, even fighting a busier rush hour as schools reopen, can all contribute to an increased stress level,” says psychologist Dr. Ron Palomares. “People who cope with stress in unhealthy ways may alleviate symptoms of stress in the short term, but end up creating significant personal health problems over time, and, ironically, more stress. My advice is to become aware of events that are likely to increase your stress levels and take steps to actively manage your stress and promote healthy coping behaviors in your children.”

The APA survey found that people expressing significant concern about stress are more likely to eat fast food, avoid exercise and use drugs or alcohol as a response to their stress than use healthier methods such as exercise, good diet, meditation or psychotherapy.

APA offers these strategies for families managing stress:

- Define stress. What does stress feel like to you? Does your stress increase during periods of change such as the transition to fall? How do your children experience stress? Different people experience stress differently.
- Identify your family's stressors. What events or situations seem to lead to stressful feelings? Are they related to a return to work, getting the children to school, family responsibilities, or something else?
- Recognize how your family deals with stress. Do you engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking or eating poorly to cope with your stress? Do you lose patience with your children or spouse when you feel overwhelmed? Are your coping behaviors different during the school year than in summer time? Do your children act up or become anxious in response to the changes in their life?

- Talk to your children. Discuss their concerns and worries about the start of a new school year or a new school. Talk about their expectations or fears prior to the first day of school. If you can, visit the school beforehand with your child so that he feels more comfortable on his first day. And after school starts, take time to listen to your children and discuss their day at school and any issues they may have.
- Spend time together as a family. Take time to relax with your spouse and children, eating meals together, scheduling a weekly family game night or engaging in weekend activities such as a bicycle ride, a visit to a museum or a local park.
- Analyze your schedule. Assess your priorities and delegate whatever tasks you can (e.g., order a healthy take out dinner after a busy day, share household responsibilities). Eliminate tasks that are not essential and make more time for those that are to reduce anxiety. Make time for yourself at least two or three times a week. Even ten minutes a day of personal time can help refresh your mental outlook and slow down your body's stress response systems. Remember that taking care of yourself helps you to take care of others.
- Ask for support. Accepting help and support from those who care about you can help alleviate stress. Perhaps a family member or friend can help with the school run once a week, take your child to soccer practice, or simply be there to listen to you? Build a support network from your friends and family. If you or your child continues to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk with a psychologist who can help address the emotions behind your or your child's behavior, manage stress, and change unhealthy behaviors.

“While the return to school and work is often a stressor for many families juggling multiple responsibilities, in the long term it can be beneficial to return to a regular routine,” adds Dr. Palomares. “What is important is to recognize how your family reacts to changes in its routine, take steps to manage your stress in healthy ways and ask for help when you need it.”

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