

Stress on the Home Front



Lesson 4:

Stress on the Home Front

Introduction

This lesson will increase your understanding of stress and how stress affects family and interpersonal relationships and will provide new skills in coping with stress on the home front.

Stress affects our personal life in many ways. Too much stress and our memory and concentration suffer, job performance decreases, and we are more prone to sickness and injury. The effects of stress in one area of our life tend to spill over into other areas. Problems at work may be brought home. Trouble at home can reduce effectiveness at work. This lesson focuses on the effects of stress at home, in our relationships with family and significant others, and seeks to help develop new ways of coping with stress on the home front.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to —

1. Demonstrate an increased understanding of the effects of stress on relationships.
2. Identify five ways to reduce stress in your home life.
3. Use one new skill for reducing stress in the home.



Getting Started

Instructors should allow 10-15 minutes to complete the test and for group discussion.

“*The Family Stress Test*” (Worksheet 4.1) is one tool to help you identify some problem areas in relationships and describe them in a way that makes sense. This test is intended only as a guide to help you compare where you are in your relationships at home with where you might want to be. (There are other more detailed relational inventories

available. If you need more assistance, please see your Family Life Chaplain or a counselor through your local mental health service.)

Please take a moment to complete “*The Family Stress Test.*” Both you and your spouse or significant other may want to individually complete the test and then share your answers. However, keep in mind the goal is to reduce stress and improve relationships. The focus should be on identifying and clarifying problems, not criticizing or disagreeing.

Worksheet 4.1



THE FAMILY STRESS TEST

Take this quiz to help you evaluate your family's stress level. Score 0 if the statement is never true for your family, 1 if rarely true, 2 if sometimes true, 3 if mostly true, and 4 if always true.

COLUMN I

1. ____ We often talk about our feelings.
2. ____ I know what's important to my kids.
3. ____ (For single parents) I'm comfortable being single.
4. ____ We have enough money for the important things.
5. ____ Work is important, but family is our top priority.
6. ____ (For couples) Our relationship is strong.
7. ____ (For couples) We both feel good about roles as parents.
8. ____ (For single parents) The kids like my choice of dates.
9. ____ Tension in our house is rare.
10. ____ The kids are doing well in school.
11. ____ Everyone in the family has a job and does it without being nagged.
12. ____ We eat together every day.
13. ____ Vacations together turn out well.
14. ____ The TV is not on during meal times.
15. ____ We share common beliefs and values.

COLUMN II

16. ____ It seems like we argue a lot.
17. ____ (For couples) Sometimes marriage is disappointing.
18. ____ The kids get upset when we argue.
19. ____ We have conflicts about how much to spend and on what.
20. ____ We don't listen enough.
21. ____ (For single parents) My kids are upset when I date.
22. ____ It seems as if someone's always mad at someone else.
23. ____ Too much work is getting to me.
24. ____ (For single parents) Being single has been very hard for me.
25. ____ There's never enough time.
26. ____ (For couples) We argue about who should do what with the kids.
27. ____ It's impossible to get the kids to do anything around here.
28. ____ I've been called in to school to discuss my child's behavior.
29. ____ We argue about who controls the TV remote control.
30. ____ (For couples) We argue over religion and politics.

Total Score: _____

Total Score: _____

Adapted from: 1995 Parlay International 1600.D40

THE FAMILY STRESS TEST SCORING

To score: Total your scores for Column I (questions 1-15) and the scores for Column II (questions 16-30) separately. Your goal is to have a high score in Column I and a low score in Column II. Both are positive signs of your family's stress skills.

What Your Scores Mean

For Column I, scores of 33 and above or Column II scores of 17 and less:

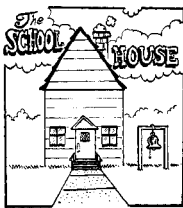
Congratulations! Your family has good skills and attitudes which help you handle life's stresses. This makes your home life rich and satisfying.

Column I = 25-32 or Column II = 18-24: ***You have a strong start.*** Try practicing your good skills and positive attitudes more to create even more harmony at home.

Column I = 18-24 or Column II = 25-32: ***You're probably under many stresses.*** Look carefully at these questions and think about ways to improve your score. Remember, it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help.

Column I = 17 and less or Column II = 33 and above: ***Taking action now is very important for your family's health and happiness.*** Reach out to friends, family or professional help for a great boost when times are tough.

Adapted from: 1995 Parlay International 1600.D40



The School House

Home is where you . . . ?

Two things are required to grow and develop healthy relationships.

- ▣ A reason or stimulus to grow
- ▣ A direction to grow.

Stimulating Growth. Not all stress is negative. Stress can encourage growth in our lives. Here is an example. You may not think that falling in love is stressful, but compare the physiological effects of “Falling in Love” with “Being Yelled At”.

Falling in Love	Being Yelled At
• Pounding Heart	• Pounding Heart
• Rapid Breathing	• Rapid Breathing
• Sweaty Palms	• Sweaty Palms
• Sleep Difficulties	• Sleep Difficulties
• Lack of Concentration	• Lack of Concentration
• Emotional Sensitivity	• Emotional Sensitivity
• Pre-Occupation	• Pre-Occupation

Falling in love may not be viewed as stressful, but it has many of the same physiological effects as being yelled at. Though these effects are similar, we perceive the sensations as worlds apart.

Stress helps us move towards change. Early in a relationship, the positive “stressful” sensations help us take the risks needed to reach out and develop the relationship. Later on stress serves as an indicator light. It signals us that we have an area where attention is needed. At that time, stress can also provide the drive or energy to make needed improvements.

No one falls in love with the goal of ending the relationship. Nearly everyone falls in



love with at least the hope that they will “live happily ever after.” The reality is that problems enter all relationships, and the spit and polish of military life has some unique stressors which can tarnish even the most shining armor. Let’s look at those stressors and then try to identify some strategies for keeping a relationship sparkling.

Sources of Stress on the Home Front

There are many advantages to military life. Lack of stress is not one of them. How many stressors can you identify in the picture to the left?

A recent Department of Defense (DOD) Survey (Bray, R.M., Kroutil, L.A., Wheelless, S.C., Marsden, M.S., Bailey, S. L., Fairbank, J. A., & Harford, T.C., 1995) reports some of the top stressors identified by service members as:

Stressor	Men	Women
1. Deployment	17.1%	6.9%
2. Permanent Change of Station	10.0%	12.2%
3. Being Away from Family	23.7%	21.1%
4. Changes in Family	12.3%	17.0%
5. Conflicts between Military and Family Responsibilities	13.0%	12.8%
6. Financial Problems	15.0%	12.2%
7. Housing Problems	7.6%	7.5%
8. Family Health Problems	7.4%	9.1%

It is easy to see why stress on the home front is a significant concern for many service members. But what about the military spouse? For military families, stressors can be seen as coming from two directions:

- ➔ Cultural and Organizational Norms
- ➔ Military Life

Cultural and Organizational Norms

It was not until the 1980s that the term *dependent* was no longer officially used to describe family members. This negative term has been replaced with *family member*. This change is in keeping with the important role that military families play in the ability of a service member to do his or her job. For example, read the following quotations from Schneider, R. J. & Martin, J. A., 1994:

"To the extent that spouses are dissatisfied with family life in the military, they will not support further active duty by the service member," p. 23.

"The Army recruits soldiers but retains families," p. 21.

Don't you agree?

In military terms, families play a major role on a service member's *readiness* defined as "a combination of a soldier's willingness and ability to do his [or her] job and cope in peacetime and during combat, and the army's ability to retain trained service members during peacetime" (Schneider, R. J. & Martin, J. A., 1994). However, many still refer to family members as *dependents*. This cultural practice colors the way family members are treated.

What other cultural and organizational norms play a role in family stress?

Cultural and Organizational Sources of Stress

- Dependent Status
- Pressure to Volunteer on Post
- Rank-based Wives Clubs
- "Wearing" the Spouse's Rank
- Isolation from Unit Support Activities When Spouse is Stationed Overseas.
- Single Parent Service Members Not Included in Formal Spouse Organizations.
- Lowest Rank and Youngest Families Have Least Access to Post Housing.
- Other(s):

Adapted from: Schneider, R. J. & Martin, J. A., 1994.

Military Life

Recent studies have supported the common belief that military family life is more stressful than civilian family life (Schneider, R. J. & Martin, J. A., 1994). Military family members view their family life as more stressful, and they experience greater psychological stress than their civilian counterparts.

What are the Stressors of Military Life?

Military Life and Stress

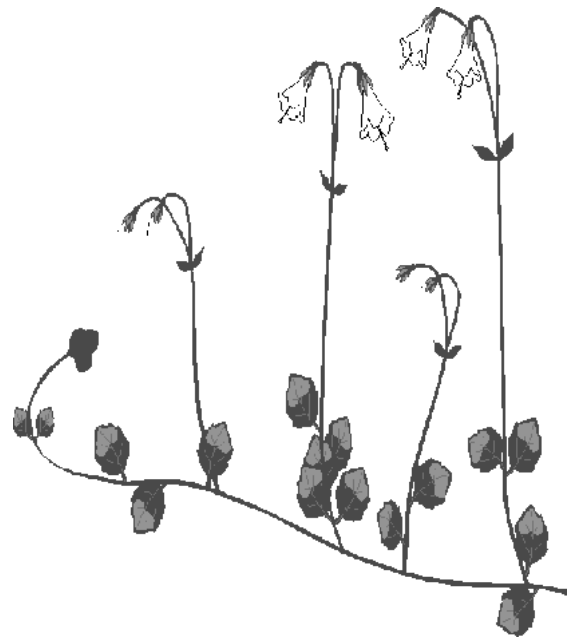
- Father (and now, Mother) Absence
- Frequent Family Relocations
- Dependence on Military Installation for Support
- Frequent, Prolonged, or Unannounced Absences (i.e., “lockins”)
- Long and Often Irregular Duty Hours
- Inability to Share Domestic and Child Care Responsibilities
- Legal Constraints and Requirements of Military Service
- Training with Modern Weapons
- Real Possibility of Deployment to Combat Zones
- Ability to Communicate Real-Time between Home and Deployment Site, but Inability to Provide Real Comfort
- Other(s):

Adapted from: Schneider, R.J. & Martin, J.A., 1994).

A Direction to Grow

- ⇨ Beliefs & Values
- ⇨ Significant Other(s) in Your Life
- ⇨ Counselor or Therapist

Stress provides the incentive to change, but not necessarily the direction that change needs to take. For example, you may make changes that result in reducing stress at home. However, the absence of stress does not mean that the problem is fixed. No stress may mean a couple has simply stopped talking about a problem — they have stopped “relating.” Instead of relying on the level of stress to gauge if your changes are on course, your direction should come from your values, discussions with



significant other(s) in your life, or perhaps the assistance of a counselor or therapist. Keep in mind, stress may actually increase before it improves.



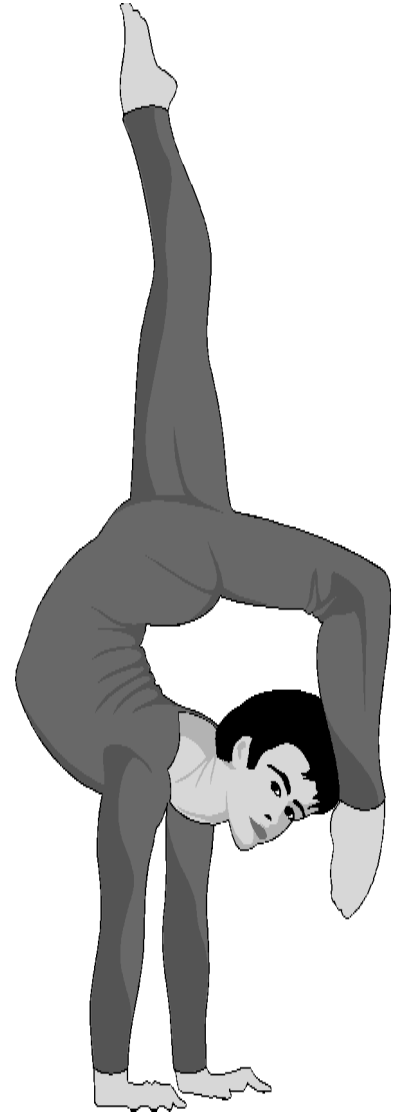
Skill-Building

It is often amazing how many lessons we learn in one sphere of life can be translated into other areas. Here is one example. The key to success on the modern battlefield is Agility, Initiative, Depth and Synchronization. Service members have had this message repeated at several times in their military career. However, this same strategy can be applied to stress on the home front.

Agility. This means flexibility. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Military families have frequent moves. Even civilians average one move every four years. Children change schools frequently. All of these changes require the ability to adapt. How can you increase your agility?

- Plan for changes.
- Get **Welcome Packets** early.
- Write to new schools to —
 - ◆ Request information.
 - ◆ Ask teachers to have their students write to welcome your children to the new class/school.

Perhaps you have additional ideas and resources for helping you adjust to change in the military. Use the space below to record those ideas:



Initiative. Sometimes life in the military can seem like moving from one crises to another. The Chinese character for crises is a combination of the symbol for two words: danger and opportunity. There is no doubt that military life has its dangers. However, there are also many wonderful opportunities as well.



It's a Matter of Perspective

The above picture may just look like a collection of rectangles and circles. But if you change the way you look at it you will find that it spells, "Hope." In each stressful situation look for the opportunity. It may be an opportunity to meet new friends, visit new sites, or learn a new culture. Sometimes we only need to change our perspective to see those opportunities.

In your current life situation, identify three areas where you could take advantage of an opportunity. Space is provided below to write out your responses.

Worksheet 3.2

Opportunities in My Life

If you need help, think of one thing you could do to improve the relationship with your spouse, your children, a co-worker, a neighbor, or your parents. Here are some suggestions.

Suggested Relationship Builders

Spouse

1. Change the way you say, "Hello" or "Good-bye."
2. Eat dinner at the table and without the TV or Radio on.
3. Put an "I Love You" note in a place your spouse will look during the day (caution: make sure you say "to whom it is from" and "to whom it is intended").
4. Follow the normal courtesies: "Thank you", "How are you", "Nice to see you", "Have a good day", "Hello", "Good-bye", "I am sorry", "I am glad to see you", and so on.
5. Other(s):

Children

1. Change the way you say, "Hello" or "Good-bye."
2. Read a story to them at night instead of watching TV.
3. Count to ten (or 100, 1000, . . .) before disciplining.
4. Each day look for opportunities to praise your child.
5. Other(s):

Co-worker

1. Remember to say, "Hello" and "Good-bye."
2. Eat lunch with your co-worker.
3. Look for something to compliment your co-worker for each day.
4. Stop your work and look at your co-worker when they talk to you (a good idea anytime somebody talks to you).
5. Other(s):

Neighbor

1. Bring over some flowers or a plant to welcome them to the neighborhood.
2. Talk to your neighbor when outside.
3. Invite them over for dinner.
4. Other(s):

Parent

Suggested Relationship Builders

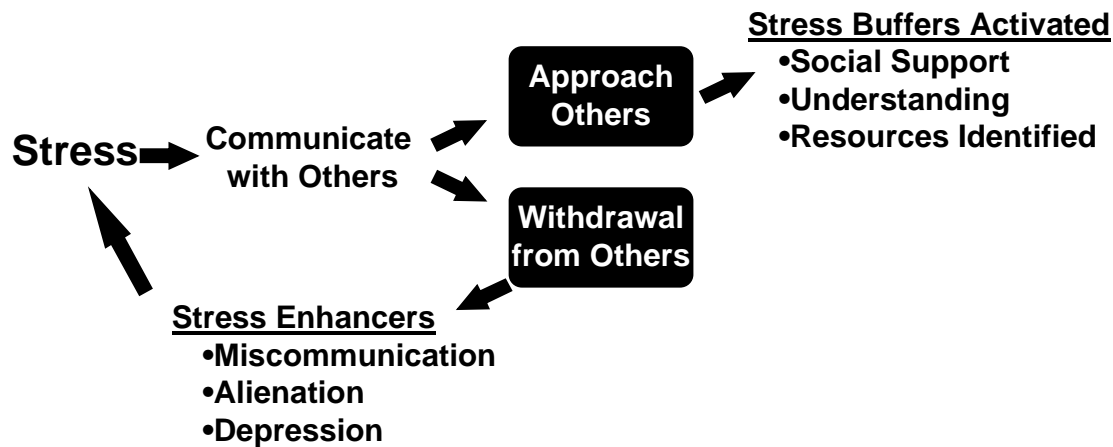
1. Call or visit regularly.
2. Send them a card on a day other than their birthday and Mother's or Father's Day.
3. Perspectives change over time. Look for one positive thing you are thankful for now that you were not particularly happy with when growing up.
4. Other(s):

Depth. “Deep calls to Deep.” Sharing your thoughts and feelings calls to another. It opens yourself up to communicate and lets others know that you are approachable. Developing your abilities to communicate allows you to share deeper in the lives of those you care about. It also allows them the opportunity to share with you.

Some people withdraw when under stress. Their withdrawal also communicates. However, the message is often unclear and distorted.

We often have problems communicating about things that are important to us—things that frighten us, worry us, stress us out, etc. Our spouse, friends, and family may misinterpret our actions. Their misinterpretation of you leads to your misinterpreting them and a vicious cycle begins. We start to act in ways that make things worse rather than bring healing. But when we open ourselves up and communicate, we allow the best in them to call to the best in us, and finally “deep truly can call to deep.”

Communication is . . .



. . . Stress Management

Oh, one note of caution: “Iron also Sharpens Iron.” Sometimes when we get close, we scrap and bump against each other. It happens. People get bruised. However, learning to keep the lines of communication open, often through practicing the art of forgiveness, allows us to continue to grow together and not apart.

Synchronization. “Timing is everything.” Here we will discuss a couple of areas where this is true at home and in our relationships with others. We will focus on:

- ☞ Finances
- ☞ Communication
- ☞ Leisure Time Planning

Finances: One of the most stressful areas for couples is in the area of finances. It is the number one source of arguments. It also has the ability to exert a continuing painful presence through mounting bills and finance charges. Two principles to keep in mind:

1. There is a time to buy and a time to refrain from buying.
2. Plastic money is not play money.

If you time your purchase to only when you can truly afford them and avoid the use of plastic money, most financial pitfalls can be avoided. If you find you are already sinking, seek help from Army Community Services or another financial counselor (e.g., the Consumer Credit Counselors).

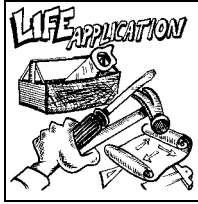
Communication: Timing your communication is also important. Don’t blind side your spouse. When you want to talk about a sensitive issue, get permission first. If the discussion is getting too heated, call a time out, cool down, and then go back to the subject only when both parties are ready to do so. However, do not let it go too long. Problems, like untreated wounds, tend to fester when left too long.



“Timing is Everything”

Leisure Time Planning: Don’t forget to take time off. Knowing when to take a break is an important step in managing the accumulation of stress. Vacations are one of the most stressful times for families. Plan your vacations so that you have time to prepare to leave and time to recover from your “vacation” before returning to work. Plan family

vacations with all family members. Finally, do not forget to plan times to relax while on your vacation.



Life Application

Friendship is like a bank account.

You can't continue to draw on it without making deposits.

--Anonymous

As mentioned earlier, "Iron Sharpens Iron." When life is stressful, we sometimes rub each other the wrong way. A word said casually can be taken as offensive, and at times of anger we may even choose our words to be painful. Friendships sometimes can be bruised and even broken. What can be done to manage those stressful times? Learn the rules for how to fight fair.

How to Fight Fair

1. Be committed to honesty and mutual respect.
2. Make sure the weapons are not deadly.
3. Agree that the time is right.
4. Be ready with a positive solution soon after the swing.
5. Watch your words and guard your tone.
6. Don't swing at your mate in public. Keep arguments private.
7. When it is over, clean up the mess. This involves kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness.
8. Best way to stop a fight: When you are beaten, surrender. Say, "I am wrong, you are right."

From: Swindoll, C., 1980, p. 102-111.



Stay Tuned

This completes the four lessons on stress management. Additional material is available in the **Special Articles** to provide you additional information on how to beat the effects of stress and make them work for you.

The **Special Articles** are —

- ***Stress Management: A Guide for Senior Leaders***
- ***Stress and Combat Performance***
- ***Stress and Nutrition***
- ***Stress and Exercise***

Further assistance in managing stress may be available through your local Medical Treatment Facility, Army Community Services, Chaplain, or Community/Division Mental Health Section.



Give Us Feedback

Please take a moment to complete the feedback form provided and return it to your instructor. This information helps us know how we are doing, so we can do a better job of providing helpful solutions for today's problems. Thank you.

References

Bray, R.M., Kroutil, L.A., Wheelless, S.C., Marsden, M.S., Bailey, S. L., Fairbank, J. A., & Harford, T.C. (1995). 1995 Department of Defense survey of health related behaviors among military personnel. Research Triangle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute.

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