

# Family Stresses in Difficult Times

Understanding and helping in times of crisis



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Jeff Natalie

President of ErieKIDS

## *What is ErieKIDS??*

ErieKIDS is an organization dedicated to the mental health education of children and families and those who serve them!!



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## Goals for this workshop

- To understand STRESS and underlying ANXIETY & ANXIETY PROCESS
- To understand the impact of fear and anxiety on parents and on the family system.
- To address how community and relational boundaries can be softened to support kids and their families through tough times.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Your Stress...

1. Take a piece of paper
2. Write down the most obvious area of stress in your life
3. Write down how you feel when you're in that situation (emotions, physical symptoms and how it changes your behavior)



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# STRESS

- “Stress is the human response to changes that occur as a part of daily living.” Stress has a physical and emotional effect on us, and it can create positive or negative feelings. Stress comes from any situation or circumstance that requires behavioral adjustment. Any change, either good or bad, is stressful, and whether it's a positive or negative change, **the physiological response is the same**”

*(Lazarus, 2000).*



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Stress vs. Anxiety

Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous, worried, or even anxious. What is stressful to one person may not be stressful to another.

Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension or fear. You may not know the source of this uneasiness, which can add to the distress you feel.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## Persistent Stress...

Most persistent stress will likely increase the likelihood of an anxious response often including physical symptoms and avoidant behavior.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# THE ANATOMY OF ANXIETY

## WHAT TRIGGERS IT ...

When the senses pick up a threat—a loud noise, a scary sight, a creepy feeling—the information takes two different routes through the brain

**A THE SHORTCUT** When startled, the brain automatically engages an emergency hot line to its fear center, the amygdala. Once activated, the amygdala sends the equivalent of an all-points bulletin that alerts other brain structures. The result is the classic fear response: sweaty palms, rapid heartbeat, increased blood pressure and a burst of adrenaline. All this happens before the mind is conscious of having smelled or touched anything. Before you know why you're afraid, you are


## B THE HIGH ROAD

Only after the fear response is activated does the conscious mind kick into gear. Some sensory information, rather than traveling directly to the amygdala, takes a more circuitous route, stopping first at the thalamus—the processing hub for sensory cues—and then the cortex—the outer layer of brain cells. The cortex analyzes the raw data streaming in through the senses and decides whether they require a fear response. If they do, the cortex signals the amygdala, and the body stays on alert

## ... AND HOW THE BODY RESPONDS


By putting the brain on alert, the amygdala triggers a series of changes in brain chemicals and hormones that puts the entire body in anxiety mode

**STRESS-HORMONE BOOST**




Responding to signals from the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, the adrenal glands pump out high levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Too much cortisol short-circuits the cells in the hippocampus, making it difficult to organize the memory of a trauma or stressful experience. Memories lose their context and become fragmented

**RACING HEARTBEAT**




The body's sympathetic nervous system is responsible for heart rate and breathing shifts into overdrive. The heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, and the lungs hyperventilate. Sweat increases, and even the nerve endings on the skin tingle into action, creating goose bumps

**FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FRIGHT**

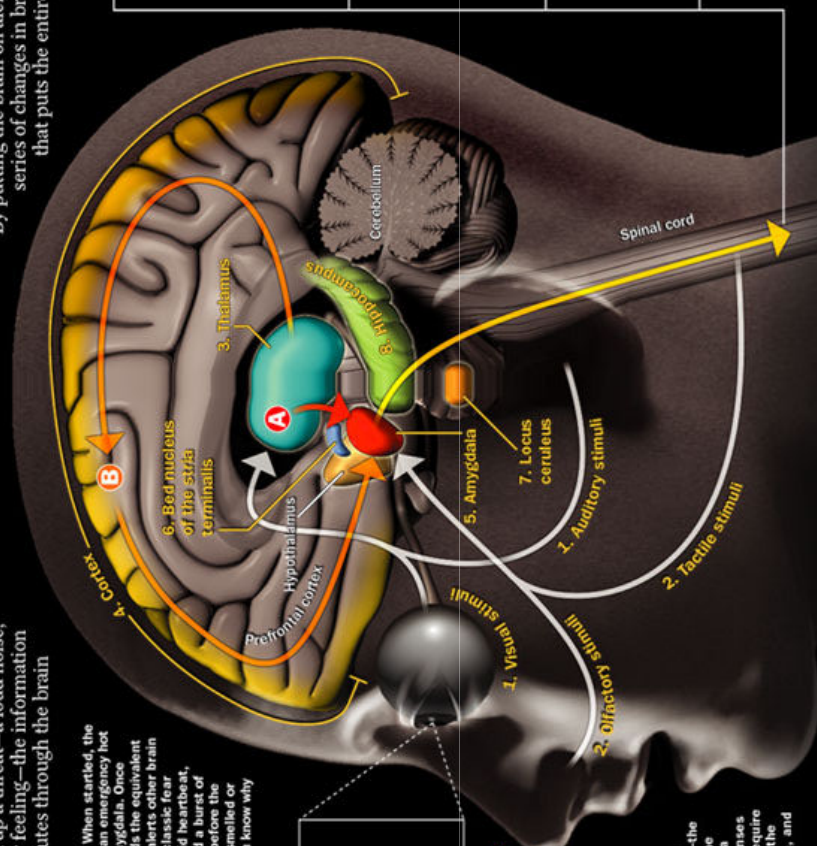


The senses become hyperalert, drinking in every detail of the surroundings and looking for potential new threats. Adrenaline shoots to the muscles, preparing the body to fight or flee

**DIGESTION SHUTDOWN**



The brain stops thinking about things that bring pleasure, shifting its focus instead to identifying potential dangers. To ensure that no energy is wasted on digestion, the body will sometimes respond by emptying the digestive tract through involuntary vomiting, urination or defecation



**1. Auditory and visual stimuli**  
Sights and sounds are processed first by the thalamus, which filters the incoming cues and shuts them either directly to the amygdala or to the appropriate parts of the cortex.

**2. Olfactory and tactile stimuli**  
Smells and touch sensations bypass the thalamus altogether, taking a shortcut directly to the amygdala. Smells, therefore, often evoke stronger memories or feelings than do sights or sounds.

**3. Thalamus**  
The hub for sights and sounds, the thalamus breaks down incoming visual cues by size, shape and color, and auditory cues by volume and then signals the appropriate parts of the cortex.

**4. Cortex**  
It gives raw sights and sounds meaning, enabling the brain to become conscious of what it is seeing or hearing. One region, the prefrontal cortex, may be vital to turning off the anxiety response once a threat has passed.

**5. Amygdala**  
The emotional core of the brain, the amygdala has the primary role of triggering the fear response. Information that passes through the amygdala is tagged with emotional significance.

**6. Bed nucleus of the stria terminalis**  
Unlike the amygdala, which sets off an immediate burst of fear, the BNST perpetuates the fear response, causing the longer-term unease typical of anxiety.

**7. Locus ceruleus**  
It receives signals from the amygdala and is responsible for initiating many of the classic anxiety responses: rapid heartbeat, increased blood pressure, sweating and pupil dilation.

**8. Hippocampus**  
This is the memory center, vital to storing the raw information coming in from the senses, along with the emotional baggage attached to the data during their trip through the amygdala.

Source: Dennis S. Charney, M.D., Behavioral Institute of Mind/Health





**HIPPOCAMPUS:** Cements the response to the threat into long-term memory

**PUPILS:** Dilate, ready to relay signs of danger to the visual thalamus

**SALIVA:** Decreases as digestive system slows

**THYROID GLAND:** Raises resting metabolic rate

**LUNG:** Bronchioles dilate, taking in more oxygen

**HAIR:** Stands on end



**AMYGDALA:** Directs central and autonomic nervous systems to trigger an all-systems alarm; also stores memory of threat

**HYPOTHALAMUS:** Incorporates signals from organs, triggers pituitary gland and nervous system, causing the body's major organ systems to prepare for action

**PITUITARY GLAND:** Produces thyrotropin and adrenocorticotropin, calling the thyroid and adrenal system into action

**HEART:** Blood pressure and heart rate spike, infusing brain and muscles with ready fuel

**SKIN:** Vessels constrict, causing chills and sweat

**LIVER:** Begins to break down glycogen for instant energy to keep up with higher metabolic rate

**SPLEEN:** Contracts, pumping out white blood cells and platelets in preparation for possible physical injury

**STOMACH AND GASTROINTESTINAL TRACT:** Vessels constrict to divert blood to muscles

**BLADDER AND COLON:** Prepare to void their contents in preparation for violent action and possible injury

**ADRENAL MEDULLA:** Floods bloodstream with adrenaline and noradrenaline, increasing the level of blood sugar and constricting blood vessels

## ANATOMY OF FEAR

Within seconds of perceiving a threat, the primitive amygdala sounds a general alarm. The adrenal system promptly floods the body with adrenaline and stress hormones. Nonessential physiological processes switch off. Digestion stops, skin chills, and blood is diverted into muscles in preparation for a burst of emergency action. Breathing quickens, the heart races, and blood pressure skyrockets, infusing the body with oxygen while the liver releases glucose for quick fuel. The entire body is suddenly in a state of high alert, ready for fight or flight.

—J. S.



# JOB LOSS

## Common behavioral/emotional changes

- **A parent's diminished ability to parent.** Parents who have lost their job often find it difficult to concentrate of the job of being a parent. They sometimes also may be afraid that their children, as well as other family members, view them as failures.
- **Difficulties remembering the "good times."** The tendency is to dwell on bad feelings toward the former employer and the negative aspects of the former job. The happy memories tend to get pushed back and ignored.
- **Increased family disputes.** Stresses due to the new family structure, the changes in the family financial situation, and the emotional trauma of job loss often result in misunderstandings and arguments. Poor communication often results, which in turn can lead to further tensions.
- **"Scapegoating" (blaming others)** The feelings of frustration and helplessness over those things we have no control of tend to spill over into the areas where we do have some control. Finding fault and placing blame become a way of dealing with life in general rather than taking control and assuming responsibility for what we do with our lives.
- **Stress-related problems.** Research shows that we become more susceptible to viruses, such as colds and flu, when we are under stress. Other physical problems, such as ulcers or high blood pressure, also often accompany prolonged stress. In addition, emotional problems such as depression can also result.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# JOB LOSS

## Specific behavioral/emotional changes

- **Concerns and disputes about the financial future.** The family life-style changes can result in concerns about the family's immediate future as well as long-term. These concerns, coupled with other stresses, often bring about family conflicts.
- **Concerns about having to move.** This is often of greater concern to older children and adolescents than to their parents.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# DEPLOYMENT

## Common behavioral/emotional changes

- **Child neglect** Inappropriate supervision includes failing to meet a child's basic needs, such as nourishment and sanitation.
- **News Addiction** The Internet allows the family to catch every bit of reporting on the area where their soldier, Marine, airman or sailor is deployed.
- **Combat Fatigue** - spousal depression, burn-out, resentment, and pathological adjustment.
- **Secondary PTSD** The spouse and/or family respond to their changed environment with anger, substance abuse or violence, replacing a peaceful and loving home life.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# Behavioral Symptoms

- Obesity and Over-eating
- Increased or excessive drinking of alcohol
- Loss of appetite or anorexia
- If you smoke - you'll smoke more
- Increased coffee consumption
- Excessive and continuing irritability with other people
- Substance Abuse
- You can't make decisions, large or small.
- Unable to concentrate - (common symptom of stress)



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Behavioral Symptoms

- Increased and suppressed anger
- Loss of your sense of humor
- Paranoia
- Not be able to cope with life, feeling out of control
- Jump from one job to another without finishing things
- Excessive emotion & crying at small irritations
- Lack of interest in anything other than work
- Permanently tired even after sleep - (another very common symptom of stress)
- Decreased sex drive / libido
- Nail biting



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Physical Symptoms

- Muscle tension
- Low back pain
- Pains in shoulders or neck
- Pains in chest
- Stomach/abdominal pain
- Muscle spasms or nervous tics
- Unexplained rashes or skin irritations
- 'Pounding' or 'racing' heart
- Sweaty palms
- Sweating when not physically active
- 'Butterflies' in stomach
- Indigestion and 'the gurgles'
- Diarrhea
- Unable to sleep or excessive sleep
- Shortness of breath
- Holding breath



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Characteristics of Resilient Children/Families

- A healthy relationship with at least one parent or close adult.
- Well-developed social skills.
- Well-developed problem-solving skills.
- Ability to act independently.
- A sense of purpose and future.
- At least one coping strategy.
- A sense of positive self-esteem and personal responsibility.
- Religious commitment.
- Ability to focus attention.
- Special interests and hobbies.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



## Characteristics of Parents affecting Resilience

- Developing trust, particularly during the first year of life.
- Obtaining and maintaining supportive family and friend relationships
- Being and showing caring and warmth.
- Having high, clear expectations without being overly rigid.
- Providing ways for children to contribute to the family in meaningful ways.
- Being sensitive to family cultural belief systems.
- Building on family strengths.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# 40 Developmental Assets

<http://www.search-institute.org/40-developmental-assets-children-grades-k%E2%80%933>



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# What you can do/encourage...

Symptoms...*Notice them.*

Well-developed observation skills are essential. Observe if more quarrels with playmates, poor concentration or bed-wetting occur.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# What you can do/encourage...

- Encourage children and show you care. Be positive.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# What you can do/encourage...

- Find individual talk time. Talk about stressful events and everyday events.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## What you can do/encourage...

- Acknowledge feelings. Let children know it is okay to feel angry, alone, scared or lonely. Give children the names for their feelings and words to express how they are feeling.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## What you can do/encourage...

- Have children view the situation more positively. Some stressors make the child feel ashamed.

*This is particularly important for parents. Shame plays a large role in driving stress and requests for help underground.*



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## What you can do/encourage...

- Structure activities for cooperation; don't promote competition. This allows individuals to go at their own pace and increases the learning of social skills.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



## What you can do/encourage...

- Involve parents, family members and friends. They can read books together, encouraging openness and listening. They also can ensure good nutrition and proper rest.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# What you can do/encourage...

Host regular, safe talks. Encourage members of the family to share experiences, fears and feelings. Adults can recognize the steps a child uses to cope and help others learn from these experiences. Encourage regular family conferences and hold classroom meetings to plan activities or to suggest solutions.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## What you can do/encourage...

- Use stories and books. Stories can help the child identify with the feelings of the character and tap their own feelings to ease them out for discussion and to discuss coping strategies.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# What you can do/encourage...

- Use art for expressing feelings. Paint, clay, sand and water all allow for active expression.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



## What you can do/encourage...

- Encourage children to act out coping skills. Playing with dolls, boxes, toy telephones, puppets, blocks, cars and similar items provides another avenue to bring feelings out for discussion.

*Goldstein's Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child*



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## What you can do/encourage...

- Give children some degree of control. Children should be allowed to choose within the framework of what is expected.
- Encourage them to make some manageable decisions and to voice their opinion.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Promoting strength in Parents

- Avoid taking things personally, which may help avoid unnecessary conflict.
- When conflict does arise, resolve the problem before moving on.
- Direct attention to solving the problem rather than determining who is to blame.
- Understand what the conflict is about and model appropriate problem-solving strategies.
- Avoid holding grudges.
- Accept responsibility for your mistakes.
- Negotiations, compromises or apologies may be necessary before reconciliation is complete.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

- **Cognitive diffusion:** Learning to perceive thoughts, images, emotions, and memories as what they are, not what they appear to be.
- **Acceptance:** Allowing them to come and go without struggling with them.
- **Contact with the present moment:** Awareness of the here and now, experienced with openness, interest, and receptiveness.
- **Observing the self:** Accessing a transcendent sense of self, a continuity of consciousness which is changing.
- **Values:** Discovering what is most important to one's true self.<sup>[4]</sup>
- **Committed action:** Setting goals according to values and carrying them out responsibly.



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# Goals

- The goal of ACT is not symptom reduction, but it is a by-product
- The goal IS to create a rich and meaningful life, while accepting the pain that goes with it
- A specific type of behavior change that leads to psychological flexibility



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Psychological Flexibility

- "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends." (Hayes et al., 2005)



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# Values

- Another important component of ACT
- The goal is to live a rich and meaningful life, which is defined based on your individual values



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

Consider how stress, avoidance and anxiety affect these domains

- Family relationships
- Friendships/social relationships
- Couples/romantic relationships
- Work/career
- Education
- Recreation/Leisure
- Spirituality/Religion
- Community/Citizenship
- Health/Physical Well-being



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)



# NOW....look at your paper

Which areas of your life are affected by your stress?

- Family relationships
- Friendships/social relationships
- Couples/romantic relationships
- Work/career
- Education
- Recreation/Leisure
- Spirituality/Religion
- Community/Citizenship
- Health/Physical Well-being



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

## Promoting Acceptance

- Encourage Self-Awareness
  - 10 - 20 "I am" statements (strengths/roles)
  - 10 - 20 "I am" statements (weaknesses)
  - 5 Self-Improvement Goals (\*increases the sense of direction and control)



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

# What we can do...

- **Eat a well-balanced, healthy diet. Don't overeat.**
- **Get enough sleep.**
- **Exercise regularly.**
- Limit caffeine and alcohol.
- Don't use nicotine, cocaine, or other recreational drugs **ESPECIALLY MARIJUANA & ALCOHOL!**
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques like guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, tai chi, or meditation.
- Take breaks from work. Make sure to balance fun activities with your responsibilities. Schedule some leisure time every day. Spend time with people you enjoy, including quality time with your family.
- Try learning to make things with your hands (such as needlepoint, woodwork, or knitting), playing an instrument, or listening to soothing music.
- **LEARN THE ACCEPTANCE and COMMITMENT MODEL!**



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)

Click to **LOOK INSIDE!**

A NEW INSIDER'S GUIDE TO HELP WORKBOOK

Learn why you're not happy and how to fix it  
Overcome depression • Reclaim emotional pain  
Prevent relapse • Improve relationships • All practical  
strategies that put you back on track today

# Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life

The New  
Acceptance &  
Commitment  
Therapy

STEVEN C. HAYES, PH.D.  
with SPENCER SMITH

Steven Hayes  
Amazon.com



[www.eriekids.org](http://www.eriekids.org)