

# building resilience when stressed

Imagine some fresh playdoh straight out of the tub. The bright, vibrant colour, fresh smelling, flexible, easy to stretch, malleable, fun to play with and full of possibility. That was me before adoption. Now get some old dried up playdoh. It's dull, hard, rigid, un-responsive, has cracks and crumbles easily...

**HAVE** taught stress management for over 20 years AND encountered many stressful situations in my life. As a child I had surgery and was in and out of hospital until I was five. Twenty-five years ago I had a life-changing experience where, after climbing Mount Kenya for four days to almost 17,000 feet, I became severely disorientated by altitude sickness and I became lost in the African jungle on my own for five days surrounded by wild animals.

I built up a business with a team of five staff and 17 freelance trainers only to have it go into liquidation after 20 years of success. So you would think the arrival of a lovely three-year-old boy would be simple... wouldn't you?

Recent research indicates that having children with attachment difficulties can cause stress that is quite unique: the stress from the challenges we are presented on a daily basis. When we are stressed we tend to stop doing all or some of the pleasurable things in life. This is even truer as a parent of an adopted child. Any spare time is used up with appointments with head teachers, therapists, reading adoption books and attending conferences, in addition to the sheer exhaustion of trying to keep life on an even keel. This gives us a double whammy of stress. We also stop getting any good feelings from the things we love to do. A third layer is the high level of negative emotions we experience from being with a challenging child.

What negative feelings does your child(ren) bring out in you? Anger, inadequacy, helplessness and hopelessness, fear, disappointment, hate, anxiety, rejection, depression, resentment, rejection, manipulation, shame, confusion, exhaustion...? This is further compounded by the guilt for feeling some of the above and for not always being the loving, nurturing, understanding parent we thought we would be.

Adoption can bring out a side of yourself that is alien to you and it is stressful being someone you no longer recognise. Adoptive parents' stress is likely

to be high for many reasons including:

- not understanding the child's behaviours
- being the target of constant rage
- always having to be hyper alert
- experiencing lying, theft, violence and verbal abuse
- constantly having to cajole, distract, reward, use humour to help to keep life on an even keel
- suffering from broken sleep because of nightmares
- safeguarding the TV, mobile phone and knives, the family pet and younger sibling.

The stress of a withdrawn or compliant child also has challenges when you are constantly trying to second-guess what is going on for them and are unable to connect with them when they go into hiding. Continued and heightened stress can lead to:

- Loss of confidence
- Loss of direction
- Loss of motivation
- Loss of self-belief
- Poor communication
- Loss of energy
- Becoming self-critical
- Over reliance on sugar, caffeine, nicotine and alcohol
- Depression, lowered immunity and illness

## blocked care

Dan Hughes and Jonathan Baylin in 2012 identified and named a syndrome they called 'blocked care'. Their research shows that if you don't get enough positive strokes back from the person you care for you can literally turn into old playdoh. Your ability to empathise and care for your child is reduced so that parenting becomes a chore. Parenting whilst in stressed-out survival mode makes us defensive, reactive, unable to emotionally regulate and empathise. Blocked care involves the shutting down of the part of the brain called the cingulate where emotional pain is usually registered as part of a parent's empathic response to a child's distress.

## how to manage stress

It is vital that we build emotional muscle and keep putting deposits into our energy bank. We need as much emotional currency as possible to remain in a giving and responding state rather than a reacting one.



### About the author

Gill Tree is a master practitioner in NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) and provided stress management training for 22 years with clients including British Telecom, HMRC and Atkins Global. She also founded and owned the UK's largest school of massage. She was a respite foster carer for two years prior to adoption and is now focusing on touch and resilience programmes for adoptive parents since becoming a single adoptive mum three years ago. Email Gill [gill@gilltree.com](mailto:gill@gilltree.com) to join her free one-hour webinar (online seminar) on resilience in May.

## remedies for stress

regular massage with help ease muscular tension, lower blood pressure, stimulate digestion and immunity, slow the heart rate and deepen breathing.

**Learning to prioritise** and managing your time will enhance a sense of being in control rather than pressure controlling you.

**Be less perfectionist:** the sun will still rise if you don't change the beds for a couple more days.

**Communication:** be open and show your feelings to appropriate people.

**Get support** - particularly from other adoptive parents which is worth its weight in gold: they will understand.

### Protect your leisure time

Don't be sure to continue some of your hobbies, see your friends and exercise. A few hours of quality leisure time will more than offset the stress of home and work. A change is as good as a rest yes, it really is true!

**Look after your diet** as a poor diet will only add to your stress. Too much caffeine, sugar, alcohol, convenience foods, salt, additives and fats will adversely affect your mental state.

**Regular exercise** will help burn up the stress hormone adrenaline and will improve the body's ability to utilize oxygen, thereby energizing the body.

**Take time out** to be quiet and reflective. Often when we are in a relaxed state answers to problems come easily and effortlessly, whilst sweating over them has produced no results.

**Take up a form of relaxation** - yoga, meditation, heart math, mindfulness or tai chi.

**Be flexible** and bend like the willow, don't resist like the oak; it is the willow that weathers the storm.

**Be careful not to tolerate the situation** in the hope it will go away, or they will grow out of it. Ask for help from wherever you can. My son's school is amazingly supportive and are using his pupil premium for some therapy.

## empathy and understanding

Listed above are some feelings you may feel when under stress and managing the challenges your children present.

**BUT** what feelings do your child(ren) experience on a daily/weekly basis?

It's the same list. When we realise that we are going through the same journey on the same rollercoaster we can begin to find what we have in common and develop some empathy.

Imagine you are enjoying a holiday in your dream destination. You're sitting by the pool, sipping your cocktail and enjoying some fresh fruit with your nose in the best book you have ever read. Suddenly there is some splashing and shouting from the pool, in a language you don't recognise, and you try to ignore it, do your best not to get irritated or annoyed, breathe deeply to stay calm, but your favourite book is getting soaked and this is really so inconsiderate if not downright rude. How can someone be so thoughtless? Eventually you jump up and are about to shout 'cut it out' only to see there is a man in the pool drowning.

How do you feel? What do you do? You reach out and rescue... Are your child's behaviours because they feel like they are drowning?

Step in their shoes for a while and feel real empathy. While you're on your own assume their posture, movements, gestures and tonality and speak as if you are them about how they feel. You may feel a little crazy but it is so insightful. I often get down to my son's level and look at the side of his face. It tells me so much and I start to see the world through his eyes. Sometimes I will whisper 'I wonder what it feels like to be you'. 'Can I find out?'

Children often feel helpless and use their behaviours to control the people around them to get some sense of connection, feel less powerless and a little less afraid.

Power gives them some relief from the usual feelings of loss, inadequacy, helplessness and rejection.

## projection

Take care not to project behaviour that is not there. It is so easy when we are stressed to misconstrue the behaviour. I once had a relationship with a man who was verbally abusive. I could swear at times that my son was his double! Once I'd stopped interpreting his behaviour through that particular filter and became more empathic, things calmed down. Instead reframe the

behaviour. He's put my phone down the toilet again. What is he trying to communicate? (That takes the patience of a saint, I know- and I'm not one!)

## stopping the downward spiral - figure 8

My relationship with my son (like any intimate relationship) has moments of great closeness, fun, camaraderie, connection and love. Imagine that being the centre of the number 8. Then something happens and the two of us we will move apart and sit somewhere along the line that makes one of the two circles of the 8. Maybe I am tired, have had some bad news or am swamped with work and he does something to annoy me. (Possibly he picks up intuitively on my lack of being present for him and does something to get my attention). If I react negatively we will move further and further apart. The relationship may even get so fractured that we become two separate circles, living almost separate lives.

This is common, but it is up to me as the adult to do something as soon as I can to bring us closer and hopefully to be back at the centre of our 8. It may be as simple as an apology or a hug.

Dan Hughes advocates PACE - playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy and it really does work.  
<http://ddpnetwork.org>

## inhibit your usual patterned reaction

I have adopted some silly voices to respond to my son's behaviour with humour and to keep the atmosphere light. I also have an imaginary friend I talk out loud to, praising my son whenever it feels appropriate. I have learnt to not shout and lecture (well mostly!) My advice would be to be realistic about your goals, change one small thing a week or a month and get out the playdoh! ●

