

Daily Union Article

Saturday, January 7, 2017

Title: Peace of Mind and Parenting

Last week I shared information about the impact that toxic and chronic stress has on brain development in a growing child from womb to adult life. The home environment of the mom, and parents in general, impacts the way a child's neurons make connections and the strength at which those connections are made.

Parenting is NOT instinct and one-size does not fit all in our approaches to parenting. Each child we raise has their own unique personality, emotional needs, and timing for development. However, one area that ALL parents can work on to promote healthy development in every one of their children is stress management. Identifying stress triggers, our body's response to stress, and interventions that we can use to control our stress levels is a win-win for both parent and child!

In recent years, I have noticed an increased awareness and acceptance of the use of mindfulness practices. Although it has become more commonplace in our Western culture, it is an age-old practice with its roots in Eastern religion. It has a proven track record for reducing anxiety and stress while helping to create a more peaceful state of mind.

As parent's, using these practices can help us provide a healthier home environment for ourselves, our partners and our children. As a result, we can promote stronger and healthier connections between the neurons in our child's developing mind and better cope with the stressful demands of parenting, family, marriage, work and all the other hats we wear. Healthy, stable relationships not only help create a culture for mental and physical health in individuals, it also helps our family's wellness.

How can you make 2017 a less stressful year? Begin by identifying your stress triggers and recognize your unique signs of stress. Our bodies signal us when we need to take care of ourselves – that is one of the key purposes for the stress response our body experiences! So, grab a pen and piece of paper and evaluate your own stress indicators. Look at this list of physical and emotional/mental indicators and write down the ones that you experience when under stress:

Physical: headache; body aches; heart pounds and breathe fast; upset stomach; fatigue; loss of appetite; want to eat all the time; muscles tighten.

Emotional/Mental: worry something bad will happen; feel helpless or overwhelmed; feel frustrated; become moody or grouchy; unable to concentrate; a feeling that people are disappointed in you; have trouble remembering things; get nervous and can't relax.

Additionally, list any indicators that you experience that are not on the ones listed previously. Now reflect on these indicators. How does your body respond to these different stress indicators? What happens to your heart rate, body temperature, temperament, or communication? These indicators impact the way you parent in that moment and likely for the next several hours or days.

Feeling stressed is a normal human response. Sometimes being stressed can push you to tackle a problem in a timely and positive way. However, stress can sometimes trigger a negative response and could hurt ourselves as well as those around us. We need to be aware of our responses to stress and help those we care about understand our stress signals in order to build and maintain healthy relationships.

When you begin to notice your stress signals, you can use healthy coping strategies, such as mindfulness.

The practice of mindfulness uses many different meditation, or breathing-focused, techniques. The focus of these techniques is on keeping yourself in the present moment, experiencing the moment in its fullness, and recognizing the feelings associated with it. Although there are a variety of ways to practice mindfulness, the goal of all the different approaches is to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by becoming aware of your thoughts and sensations in that moment without judgement. All mindfulness techniques are a form of meditation.

As you prepare yourself for the experience, find, create and maintain a calm environment. You can do this by shutting the door to the room you are in, turning the lights down or off, and removing distracting noises.

In their online Health Publications website, Harvard Medical School offers these mindfulness techniques:

Basic mindfulness meditation: Sit quietly and comfortably. Focus on your natural breathing or on a word or “mantra” that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgement and return focus on breath or word.

Body sensations: Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgement and simply let them pass. Notice each part of your body beginning with your head and working down to your toes.

Sensory: Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them “sight”, “sound”, “smell”, “taste”, or “touch” without judgement and let them go.

Emotions: Allow emotions to be present without judgement. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: “joy,” “anger,” “frustration.” Accept the presence of the emotions without judgement and let them go.

Urge Surfing: Cope with cravings (for addictive substances or behaviors) and allow them to pass. Notice how your body feels as the craving enters. Replace the wish for the craving to go away with the certain knowledge that it will subside.

You can find more mindfulness tips at: <https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm>

Using mindfulness to reduce and manage stress in your daily life is not only good for your health, it is good for your relationships with others. The demands of parenting are not trivial, but managing those demands can help us nurture our children's development and build stronger connections. For more information on parenting and family relationships, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!