

# Taking Care of Ourselves

## CONSULTANT'S NOTES



## Introduction

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) is intended to support caregivers in developing an increased awareness and understanding of the impact of their interactions on a child's social-emotional (SE) well being. It serves as an effective strategy for addressing challenging behaviors and supporting young children's SE development in early care and education settings. The "Taking Care of Ourselves" booklets and workshop materials are tools designed to support your work as an early childhood mental health consultant. You can support caregiving and parenting practices through introducing and facilitating the use of these booklets with providers and parents as an intentional and structured professional development opportunity as well as scheduling time to conduct the workshop and distribute the workshop materials.

While there is not one definition of stress, we define stress as a *physical, mental or emotional response to events that cause bodily or mental tension*. Stress can come from a situation or even a thought that makes you feel frustrated, nervous, anxious or angry. Stress can be a good thing, helping an individual focus on a task or perform at a higher level. Stress can also be harmful, having a negative impact on your body and mind's ability to deal with a present situation; this is the kind of stress caregivers should try to limit and learn to manage in a healthy way.



Providing care to young children is an intense and demanding job. It can become increasingly difficult when combined with relationship, financial or other stressful concerns. Many forms of harsh discipline and neglect come about because caregivers are stressed and lack the appropriate supports to manage their stressors in a more healthy way. Harsh and inconsistent discipline has been shown to lead to increases in children's challenging behavior—which in turn can lead to more stress for the caregivers.

Additionally, a large body of research suggests that our *attachment bonds*—that is, babies' first love relationships formed with primary caregivers—have deep and lasting effects on their ability to manage stress, communicate with body language, stay tuned in to their emotions and easily forgive, or let go of grudges as adults. The success or failure of these primary relationships is heavily dependent upon caregivers' physical and mental well-being, and shapes



the basis for all future relationships. Insecure attachments are often the result of physical/mental abuse and neglect, maternal depression, maternal abuse of drugs/alcohol and inconsistency in primary caregivers. It is therefore, critical that caregivers are able to: 1) focus on meeting their own needs and the needs of the child simultaneously; and 2) appropriately manage stress so that it does not adversely affect the relationship between the child and themselves.

The table on the right outlines some common signs and symptoms of stress.

COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS	
COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memory problems</li> <li>• Inability to concentrate</li> <li>• Continuous worrying</li> <li>• Racing thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling down</li> <li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>• High level of irritability (short temper)</li> <li>• Inability to relax</li> </ul>
PHYSICAL	BEHAVIORAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive perspiration</li> <li>• Chest pains/ elevated heart rate</li> <li>• Frequent colds or illness</li> <li>• Nausea, dizziness or headaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase or decrease in appetite</li> <li>• Nervous habits (nail biting)</li> <li>• Difficulty sleeping or irregular sleep patterns</li> <li>• Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs excessively</li> </ul>

## How Should the “Taking Care of Ourselves” Booklets Be Used?

Each “Taking Care of Ourselves” booklet contains practical tips to assist caregivers (providers and parents) in managing their day-to-day stress in a way that nurtures their physical and emotional needs and those of the children ages 0-3 that they care for. The booklets will assist caregivers in:

1. Better understanding their stressors
2. Recognizing the signs of stress
3. Identifying and using techniques to lessen their levels of stress

You are encouraged to introduce the booklet to small groups of caregivers (providers and parents separately). Identify a convenient time for a parent training/meeting. Parents may be

more available to meet with you during the evening hours or weekends if possible. Providers may be more available to meet with you during naptime or at a scheduled professional development time. It should take approximately 45 minutes to introduce the tool, facilitate suggested activities and assist caregivers in identifying practical strategies for reducing their stress.

### Supplies Needed

- Chart paper
- Markers
- “Taking Care of Ourselves” Booklets (provider or parent version)
- Paper for Journaling Notes

### Tips

1. Prior to using the tool with caregivers, you are encouraged to visit the Head Start program and observe interactions between and amongst staff and children, or amongst parents and their children

during socializations or at drop-off and pick-up. Pay particular attention to individual staff/parents with whom you will be working.

2. Create a safe space for families and providers to talk with you one on one about how they are coping with stress.
3. Familiarize yourself with the background information and research components provided in the introduction of these notes in order to help caregivers understand the importance of maintaining reduced levels of stress to best support a child’s social emotional development. There is an accompanying PowerPoint presentation that is designed to share some of this information with staff and families on the [www.echmc.org](http://www.echmc.org) website (see below).



### Warm-Up Activity

**Knowing Your Stressors and the Signs of Stress** (located on page 1 in the booklet)

In order for caregivers to successfully reduce their levels of stress and the impact it has on themselves and the children they care for, they must first recognize their stressors or “primary pressure points.” Divide caregivers into pairs to discuss the following questions: 1) What is stress? 2) What causes stress? 3) How do I know when I’m experiencing stress? Have each caregiver record their responses on page 1 of the booklet. After five minutes, have each small group report back to the larger group. Review all responses from the warm-up activity and use the group’s answers as a basis for your introduction of the tool.

### Using the Taking Care of Ourselves Booklets

Briefly discuss with caregivers the definition of stress (*link this with how participants defined stress in the warm-up activity and the definition of stress in the introductory section of this document*) and use some of their examples from the warm-up activity. Review with caregivers a few techniques from each of the booklet sections (*FOR PARENTS*: “Right After Birth”, “With a Mobile Infant” and “With a Toddler”. *FOR PROVIDERS*: “While Caring for an Infant” and “While Caring for a Toddler”). Have caregivers think about and discuss in what specific situations the techniques appear helpful.

The booklets contain several blank spaces for caregivers to fill-in responses related to healthy eating and exercise habits. Enlist the assistance of a local nutritionist and/or fitness expert to discuss with the group how they can incorporate healthy food choices and increased movement in their daily routines. Having experts on hand will allow caregivers the opportunity to ask specific health related questions and receive guidance on culturally relevant ways to complete the healthy eating and exercise elements of the booklet.

### Developing an Individualized Action Plan

Learning to manage stress in a healthy way may not come naturally to caregivers. When practicing any new behavior, it is important to develop a strategy for using it ahead of time in order to increase the chances of adopting the new behavior successfully. To begin this exercise, have caregivers refer to their responses from the warm up activity to pinpoint one stressor and one sign of stress. Have them choose at least one technique provided in the booklet for each of their stressors and signs of stress.

BELOW IS A SAMPLE INDIVIDUALIZED PLAN:

When **[my stressor]** (*the baby cries for longer than 5 minutes*) and I begin to feel **[sign of stress]** (*my heart race*), I will **[technique to use]** (*listen to audio recordings from the website to help me calm down: [www.ecmhc.org](http://www.ecmhc.org)*).

## How Should the “Taking Care of Ourselves” Workshop Materials Be Used?

The “Taking Care of Ourselves” workshop consists of a power point presentation (Microsoft PowerPoint 97-2003) and two presentation handouts, “Common Thought Distortions” and “Stress Log Template.” Additionally, there are 12 fact sheets intended to be displayed as “bathroom graffiti.”

The PowerPoint presentation should take approximately 90 minutes to deliver. It can be used in its entirety; or if you don’t have that much time, portions of the presentation can be used alone.

The “bathroom graffiti” should be placed on the walls of the bathroom stalls following the presentation. The fact sheets can be rotated on a monthly or biweekly basis. The fact sheets cover material from the workshops and are meant to reinforce learning from the workshop.

### Supplies Needed

- Computer or thumb drive for the PowerPoint presentation
- Copies of the “Common Thought Distortions” and “Stress Log Template”
- A printout of the presentation in “notes form” for yourself and handout forms for audience
- Chart paper
- Markers
- Paper for creating an “Action Plan”



### Tips

1. Prior to conducting the workshop familiarize yourself with the Deep Breathing and Progressive Relaxation Exercises techniques found on the 19 and 20 slides. During the presentation you will want to have a print out of the presentation in “notes form” so that you can read the scripts for these exercises.
2. If you have not already familiarized yourself, take a moment to review the background information and research components provided in the introduction of these notes to help caregivers understand the importance of maintaining reduced levels of stress to best support a child’s social emotional development.
3. Create a safe space for families and providers to talk amongst themselves about the sources of stress and how they are coping with stress.

4. Alert providers to the upcoming placement of the “bathroom graffiti” fact sheets.
5. If completing the workshop with families, assemble the “bathroom graffiti” materials as take home handouts. Suggest to families that they may wish to place the materials around their house for inspiration such as on the refrigerator, family message board, or in the bathroom.

### Using the Taking Care of Ourselves Workshop

Provide a basic introduction to the PowerPoint presentation and workshop which can be found on slide number 1. Before starting the official presentation address any questions from the participants. Provide the Common Thought Distortions and Stress Log Template handouts when you address these specific topics. The final activity of the workshop is the development of

the “Action Plan” which is the same activity explained above in the “Taking Care of Ourselves” Booklets.

### The “Bathroom Graffiti” Fact Sheets

There are 12 fact sheets providing education about the sources of stress and ways to reduce stress. The fact sheets can be placed around the early child care center for example, in the bathroom stalls, following the presentation of the workshop. We recommend you rotate the fact sheets so they provide an ongoing reminder to providers about how to reduce stress in their lives. Each fact sheet could be posted for 2-4 weeks; and then a new one replaces it.

