

How Strong Families Manage Stress and Crisis

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Lesson Goals:

The goals of this program are to help adults in the community:

- Learn about the useful things strong families do in times of stress and crisis.
- Identify their own strengths that they have found useful in difficult times.
- Share these strengths with each other so everyone can learn new ways to manage stressful times in their lives.

Lesson Objectives:

- Participants will use the *Stress Checklist* to think about the ways they manage stress effectively in their family.
- Participants will see the positive things members of their family do when faced with challenges in life. Individuals who volunteer to share their experiences will be encouraged to tell brief stories illustrating how their family has used their strengths to rise above difficulties in life.

Before the Meeting:

Read the Leader's Guide and the Participant's Guide. Plan how you are going to conduct the activity in the Participant's Guide.

After the Meeting/Evaluation:

At the end of the discussion, ask participants to fill out the evaluation forms anonymously and leave them with you. Please return copies to Kathleen Lodl, Assistant Dean, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 211F Agricultural Hall, P.O. Box 830703, Lincoln, NE 68583-0703.

Introduction:

Based on studies of family strengths, researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and allied universities in the U.S. and many other countries have revealed the qualities that make families strong and secure in the face of adversity.

Six major family strengths are commonly found in families everywhere:

1. *Appreciation and affection for each other.* People in strong families deeply care for one another, and they let each other know this on a regular basis. They are not afraid to express their love.
2. *Commitment.* Members of strong families show a strong commitment to one another, investing time and energy in family activities and not letting their work or other priorities take too much time away from family interaction.
3. *Positive communication.* Successful families are often task-oriented in their communication, identifying problems and discussing how to solve them together.

Perhaps even more important than this, strong families also spend time talking with and listening to one another just to stay connected. Some of the most important talk occurs when no one is working at connection. Open-ended, rambling conversations can reveal important information, which helps smooth out the bumps of family living.

4. *Enjoyable time together.* One study of 1,500 schoolchildren asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” Few replied that money, cars, fancy homes, television sets, or Disney World made a happy family. The kids were most likely to say that a happy family is one that does things together, a family that genuinely enjoys the time they share with each other.
5. *Spiritual well-being.* Religion or spirituality is very important in the lives of many strong families. We use the term spiritual well-being to describe this concept, indicating that it can include organized religion, but not necessarily so. People in strong families describe this concept in a wide variety of ways. Some talk about faith in God, hope, or a sense of optimism in life; some say they feel a oneness with the world. Others talk about their families in almost religious terms, describing the love they feel for one another with a great deal of reverence. Others express these kinds of feelings in terms of ethical values and commitment to important causes. Spiritual well-being can be seen as the caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion. It is a feeling or force that helps people transcend themselves and their petty day-to-day hassles, and focus on that which is sacred to them in life.
6. **The ability to manage stress and crisis effectively.** Strong families are not immune to stress and crisis, but they are not as crisis-prone as troubled families tend to be. Rather, they possess the ability to manage both daily stressors and difficult life crises creatively and effectively. They know how to prevent trouble before it happens and how to work together to meet challenges when they inevitably occur in life.

Recommended Resources:

Web site

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension resources on strong families: <http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/hfc/strongfamilies>

Books

DeFrain, J., and the Extension UNL for Families Writing Team. (2007). *Family Treasures: Creating Strong Families*. Shanghai, China and Lincoln: iUniverse Publishers.

This very practical book by UNL Extension focuses on the six major qualities of strong families and offers more than 60 activities that families can do to enhance their strengths. Available from: <http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/hfc/strongfamilies>

Olson, D. H., DeFrain, J., and Skogrand, L. (2008). *Marriages And Families: Intimacy, Diversity And Strengths* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

This 550-page textbook is a useful resource for those interested in learning about marriages and families from a strengths-based perspective. It covers a broad range of topics including communication and conflict resolution, managing financial resources, gender roles and power, dating and early marriage, parenthood, the middle and later years, single-parent and stepfamilies, families in crisis, and many other areas.