

Navigating stress and the impact on family¹



These are extraordinary times. All of us are on a journey through uncharted waters during a storm. Unlike many past crises, as serious as they were, this one involves not only financial security but quite literally life and death.

Introduction

As we proceed in this journey, we have tried to identify a framework for making wise choices, so as not to feel entirely at sea. This whitepaper sketches out this framework. It begins with practices central to family health: empathic communication and governance. Then, since healthy families are made up of healthy individuals, it offers practices that individual family members can use to cope during this stressful time.

The current crisis underscores the importance of humility. While uncertain times provide opportunities for some, they create stress and pain for many. For those of you who are already applying some of the practices we describe, we hope that these pages strengthen existing habits. For others, some of these insights will be new. Whatever the case may be, we share these ideas with you in the spirit of humility, recognizing that you know yourself and your family best.

Practices for families

Despite being “sheltered in place” and not being able to travel, many of us may be “seeing” (in a virtual sense) more of our extended families than we usually do. That’s not to mention parents who find themselves at home with children, teenagers or young adults nearly 24/7. We may also have renewed appreciation for our “families of affinity,” our network of friends, colleagues and others who comfort and support each other in tough times.

Purposeful families are using this time to engage in practices that build their resilience and their ability to endure and bounce back from difficult times. These practices fall under the rubrics of empathic communication and governance (deciding how to make important decisions).

Empathic communication

Self-awareness

Whether virtually or in person, it is important to be aware of how family members push each other’s “hot buttons,” and that these hot buttons normally get more sensitive under stress. To manage interactions that intensify when hot buttons are pushed, there are several things you can do:

- If you feel things are getting heated, give yourself a “pause.” An easy way to do this is to count to 10 before replying to something that’s been said.
- During the pause, try to recognize what part you are playing in the exchange. Emotional interactions are never one-sided.
- Be aware of yourself and what you’re feeling in the

interaction. Is it anger? Frustration? Fear? Sadness?

- Assume that the person you’re talking with has good intent. Assuming that they mean well can take a lot of the “heat” out of the exchange.
- Cultivate your own good intent. At a time when everyone feels some fear and sadness, kindness and empathy might be our most important assets.

Beyond specific interactions, it helps to recognize that we all have our preferred styles of communicating with and behaving toward others, and that stress tends to make those styles more rigid. For example:

- Family leaders are usually comfortable driving action and decisions. Under stress, these **drivers** may become more controlling and impatient.
- Some family members are **analytical**, wanting to think things through with a focus on logic and process. Under stress, they may become more hesitant and risk-averse.
- **Expressive** family members are often energetic, creative and communicative; under stress they may become overly emotional and verbally aggressive.
- Every family has **amiable** members, who are steady, agreeable, team players. Under stress they may become acquiescent and eager to please. Being aware of our own and others’ styles can help us communicate more effectively, especially during stressful times.

Togetherness and separateness

One of the benefits of wealth is that some families have been able to leave urban centers and quarantine themselves on private estates. This is a great way to protect “human capital.” But it can also mean that adult family members suddenly find themselves living together, or in close proximity, for the first time since childhood. In-laws may be living closer to their spouse’s parents or siblings than they ever imagined they would. This sudden togetherness can add significant stress to an already stressful situation.

In this situation, we recommend that families thoughtfully discuss these points:

- What “ground rules” would make close living more enjoyable? (e.g., rules about noise, vehicle use, visitors during quarantine, as well as speaking and acting with respect toward each other)
- How will common spaces (e.g., kitchens, living rooms, game rooms) be used and maintained?
- How can family members who are working remotely maintain a quiet, distraction-free workspace?
- At what times or under what conditions are each other’s rooms or houses “open for visits”?

- What signals can family members use to indicate to each other, respectfully, that a conversation or interaction is becoming too much and that they need some space, physical or psychological?

Reflect for a moment: what mix of family togetherness and separateness do you think that your closest family members want now?

Talking about serious matters

Empathic communication is crucial for talking about serious matters that might have felt low priority or hard to discuss before the current crisis. For example, access to food, needed medications, safe clinical environments, as well as personal security. Many of us have been reviewing our emergency plans. Who are older family members' medical proxies? Who will watch younger children if parents are sick or need to quarantine themselves?

Families are also clarifying matters that are not urgent but are still important. "What matters most to you, and why?" How would you answer this question—and how would your closest family members? If you're not sure, consider using a video call and asking each participant to share his or her responses. This conversation could truly deepen your understanding of and appreciation for each other.

Remember the joy

A crucial element of empathy is empathizing with yourself. Everyone needs some fun. We know families who have played simple games like Bingo via a video call. Others have shared meals together or celebrated birthdays or anniversaries, all virtually. Finding moments to celebrate and enjoy each other makes empathic communication easier, and it is crucial, now more than ever.

Governance

Take a moment to ask yourself: "What specific decisions does my family face in the current crisis? How can we best make those decisions?"

Governance means deciding how you make decisions. Some families govern themselves informally. Maybe "everyone knows" that Dad or Mom is the ultimate decision-maker. Others have highly developed governance structures, such as Family Councils. Thinking about governance can feel like a luxury. But all the practices we have shared thus far—from emergency preparedness, to ground rules for togetherness, to something as simple as organizing a call—involve governance, because they all involve decision-making.

Different circumstances require different forms of governance. No one would want a committee to steer a ship in a storm. Crises demand quick, authoritative, expert decision-making, usually in the form of a single captain or co-captains. At the same time, skilled decisionmakers recognize that they do not have all the answers. They learn from others who have the expertise they lack.

The current crisis has led many families to look hard at their governance. Some are realizing that it is time to advance long-standing plans to devolve decision-making from the family elders to the rising generation, often in the form of a sibling council or partnership, perhaps with a subset of members as an executive team. Other families are recognizing the true value of involving non-family experts, such as trustees or other advisors, in their deliberations and decision-making. (This is another way to take advantage of your "family of affinity.") Still others have had difficult conversations about curtailing their more inclusive governance structures to make quick decisions in fast-moving areas (such as emergency preparedness). Many families have recognized that more centralized authority also requires more regular communication.

Governance can and should adapt to circumstances. The key is that your family feel able to discuss and make those changes openly and thoughtfully.

Practices for individuals

Healthy families are made up of healthy individuals. The family practices we have described rely upon resilient individuals to pursue them. There are three keys to individual resilience: physical care, quality social connections and making your mind work for you. We will summarize them briefly below. As you read, use this opportunity to step back, for a moment, from the current storm and reflect on which of these practices you are using now, and which you would like to integrate into your daily life.

Physical care

Nutrition is fundamental to physical care. Stress can cause us to eat too much, too little or not well. Listen to your body and observe your choices. Are you eating more junk food or drinking more alcohol than you'd like? What healthier choices could you have ready at hand?

Besides promoting health, **exercise** clears the mind and lifts the spirits. It can be a challenge to exercise if you do not have access to your usual gym or pool or the like. Could you instead fit out a home exercise station, or perhaps move equipment to a location in your home

where you can enjoy a beautiful view? It is also crucial to get outside, take walks, run or bike.

The third element of physical care is **relaxation**. Relaxing may involve turning off the news, setting aside e-mail or texts, not watching the markets. Rather than tune out altogether, perhaps set aside time each day when you can catch up on the latest news or necessary communications. You may also want to try practices such as meditation or yoga or simple, relaxing reading.

Quality social connections

Quality relationships are with people who help us focus forward, on what we can do, who help us problem solve and who affirm us. Ask yourself: what quality social connections do I want to foster at this time?

Making your mind work for you

In this crisis, we need to develop the ability to be our own doctors, as it were, and to diagnose how our heads are doing. Ask yourself: Am I finding it hard to focus and to make decisions? Do I find myself feeling anxious, scared, down or hopeless? Is my sleep disrupted? Am I having a hard time making decisions and focusing? Noticing these things is the beginning of taking your own mental “temperature.”

Next, stop and notice what you are saying to yourself about the situation. Try to look through the emotions to the statements that your inner voice repeats. For example, you may be saying the following to yourself, consciously or sub-consciously: “Things are never going to be OK.” “We are not going to get through this.” “This is the beginning of the end.”

Once you’ve listened to what you’re telling yourself, then ask this simple question, “Is what I am saying to myself useful?”

This process of reflection will allow you to remind yourself of experiences that provide ground for realistic hope. Reflect on how you managed difficult times in the past. Whatever the nature of past crises (medical, familial, financial, etc.), ask yourself, “What skills, knowledge and choices allowed me to find my way through?”

Conclusion

We are all on a journey with new and frightening features. Resilience is not a cure-all. But focusing on strengthening your resilience can help you weather this storm in ways that feel authentic and productive.

For families, resilience is strengthened through the practice of empathic communication and thoughtful governance. For individuals, the keys to resilience lie in physical care, quality social connections and making your mind work for you rather than against you.

One more practice can strengthen us all: the practice of gratitude. In times like these, when we all feel at risk, when so much has been taken away, remind yourself, through gratitude, of what you still have and what really matters to you.

Questions for reflection

Please take a moment to reflect once more on the questions below. Write down your responses so that you can review them later. You may also want to invite other members of your family to reflect on these questions and then have a discussion of your answers.

- What kind of mix of family togetherness and separation do I think that my closest family members want now?
- What specific decisions does my family face in the current crisis?
- How can we best make those decisions?
- What can I do to take care of myself in the areas of nutrition, exercise and relaxation?
- What quality social connections do I want to foster at this time?
- What can I say to myself about the current situation that would be helpful?
- What have I done in the past that has helped me overcome challenges?
- What am I most grateful for?

¹ Based on material previously published by the authors in Complete Family Wealth (Bloomberg, 2017), The Cycle of the Gift (Bloomberg, 2012) and “Resilience as a Form of Family Wealth” (Wise Counsel Research, 2020). Used with permission. All rights reserved. Adapted from “Resilience as a Form of Family Wealth,” Massenzio and Whitaker © 2020, with permission.