

Presence in the Storm

Strength for Families in Times of Stress

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Presence—being emotionally and relationally available to one another and abiding in relationship with God—forms a foundation for navigating stress within families.

This document focuses on the theme of presence and its role in navigating periods of stress and crisis.

How stress affects families

During times of significant stress, family life can become strained and disrupted. Things may not function as they normally do. There may be more conflict, more tension, less patience, and less capacity to manage everyday situations.

This is normal. It is not something to be ashamed or afraid of.

Stress affects both adults and children, and it often shows up in how we feel and how we behave.

In children, this may look like strong emotional reactions. There may be anger, tantrums, or sudden changes in behaviour. While some children express this outwardly, others respond by turning inward, becoming anxious, withdrawn, or shutting down.

In adults, stress can also take different forms. There may be moments of feeling overwhelmed, reactive, or easily frustrated. At other times, emotions may feel distant or muted. There may be a sense of not quite feeling like ourselves.

These responses can feel unsettling and unfamiliar. They may not reflect how we usually see ourselves or our families. But they are common responses to stress. They do not mean that something is wrong.

We are designed for connection

God has given us natural ways to help manage stress. These are built into how our bodies and relationships work.

One of these is our ability to regulate one another. We are not meant to calm down alone.

When we are close to someone we care about, particularly during safe, attuned physical touch such as a hug or holding hands, our breathing patterns and heart rates can begin to synchronise. In a real and measurable way, we can help settle one another's nervous systems.

Scientifically, this is known as *co-regulation*.

This means that within a family, parents have a powerful role. A calm, steady presence can help an anxious child's body start to settle. Over time, families can begin to stabilise together.

The key here is not so much in what we do, or in the tools and techniques we use. It is in the simple act of being present.

During periods of stress, our calm and grounded presence is one of the most powerful things we can offer our families.

Rest, not striving

In order to be calm and steady for others, we first need to become grounded ourselves.

During times of stress, it is important to let go of unrealistic expectations.

There are no perfect parents in these moments. There are no “superheroes” who can hold everything together without strain. When we place these expectations on ourselves, it can increase pressure and make it harder to respond with patience and clarity.

Lowering expectations during stressful times is not a failure. It is part of how we remain grounded and able to function in a healthy way.

We also need to pay attention to our own inner world and allow space to notice what we are feeling, without ignoring it or becoming overwhelmed by it.

During periods of stress, we may experience fear, frustration, exhaustion, or emotional numbness. These responses can feel unfamiliar, but they are natural responses to stress.

Being grounded does not mean having no emotional response. It means being able to return to a place of steadiness, even when emotions rise and fall.

God does not ask us to carry everything in our own strength, but invites us to return to Him and find rest.

**“For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:
‘In returning and rest you shall be saved;
In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.’” — Isaiah 30:15**

Rest is not the absence of storms. It is a place of being held and steadied, even in the midst of them. From this place of physical, emotional, and spiritual rest, we are able to return to our families with greater calm, clarity, and presence.

Strength comes from resting, not striving.

Holding both together: Emotional honesty and resilience

During times of stress, it is important to be honest about what we are going through. There is no need to minimise it, or to pretend that things are easier than they are. Naming the reality of the situation, and acknowledging how it is affecting us, is an important part of staying grounded.

At the same time, emotional honesty on its own is not enough. We also need to hold onto a framework of strength and resilience. This means remembering that the situation will not last forever, that we are not without resources, and that we are not alone.

Emotional honesty and resilience are not in opposition. They are meant to be held together. We are able to say, “This is hard,” and at the same time, “We will come through this.” We can acknowledge weakness, while also holding onto strength. We can recognise the difficulty of the present moment, while still looking ahead with hope.

One of the clearest expressions of this in Scripture is found in Psalm 23. These verses hold together both the reality of danger and the presence of God that brings comfort, strength and hope.

**The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.**

**He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.**

**He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name’s sake.**

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever. — Psalm 23**

This psalm does not deny the reality of the valley of the shadow of death, or the presence of enemies. It names them clearly. At the same time, it holds firmly to God's presence, His provision, and His care.

The picture of God preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies is especially key for families walking through crisis situations. While there may be forces of darkness all around, at the centre of the image there is a table, and by implication, a meal. This is a picture of living life, eating, drinking, being in relationship with one another, laughing, talking, and drawing strength and joy from being together.

These verses give us a framework for how families can remain strong and unified during times of stress.

Helping our children talk about their feelings

Parents can use the same framework to guide conversations with their children about stress—allowing space for emotional honesty while still holding onto strength and resilience.

It is important to allow children to express fear and difficult emotions, without trying to deny or minimise them. For children, it can feel more frightening when their experience is dismissed. If they sense that something is difficult or dangerous, but are told there is nothing to worry about, they may feel alone, unheard, and isolated.

At the same time, the conversation can be gently brought back to resilience. The difficulties are real. The “enemies” in the psalm are real. But even in the midst of this, a table can still be set. There can still be moments of connection, of shared life, of laughter, and of strength drawn from being together.

In practical terms, this may include maintaining small daily rhythms and achievable tasks. These help to anchor the family and create a sense of continuity, even when circumstances feel uncertain. It can also be helpful to take time each day to notice and give thanks for something good, however small.

During times of stress, strength comes when we can hold two realities together at the same time:

“This is really hard”

“We will make it through”

When emotions overflow

During times of stress, there may be moments when a child becomes overwhelmed in ways that can look alarming. This may include intense crying, shouting, panic, or a loss of control. For parents, these moments can feel frightening, especially when the reaction seems sudden or out of character for their child.

Although these responses can look intense, they are not dangerous. They are the body's way of expressing and releasing stress.

The most important thing in these moments is for the parent to remain as calm and steady as possible. A child who is overwhelmed is not able to calm themselves alone. They are looking, often without realising it, for someone whose presence feels safe and stable.

In times like these, it can be tempting to try to reason with the child or to correct and discipline the behaviour. However, this is often ineffective. When a child is overwhelmed in this way, their thinking and reasoning abilities are not fully accessible. They are responding from a heightened nervous system state that is largely outside of their control.

This can feel confusing and frightening for the child, and attempts to reason or correct them in that moment can increase their distress. What they need first is not explanation or correction, but help returning to a place of regulation.

What helps most is not fixing the situation, but being present within it. A calm tone of voice, a steady posture, and a non-anxious response can signal safety to the child's body and allow their nervous system to begin to settle.

If the child is comfortable with touch, gentle physical contact such as a hand on the shoulder or a hug can be very regulating. If they do not want to be touched, simply staying nearby and speaking calmly can have the same effect.

Simple, reassuring words can help. Phrases such as "I am here," "You are not alone," or "This will pass" can gently guide the child through the moment without adding pressure.

Over time, these experiences can become opportunities for growth. When children are met with calm and steady presence in moments of distress, they begin to learn that strong emotions can be tolerated and that they do not have to face them alone.

When children experience overwhelming anxiety, our calm and regulated presence can help them stabilise.

When stress shows up in the body

The body and mind are closely connected. When a child feels anxious or overwhelmed, it can show up as physical symptoms. These may include headaches, stomach aches, tiredness, or other unexplained pains. It is important not to dismiss these symptoms and to check out whether there may be a medical cause.

At the same time, recognising the role of stress allows parents to respond in a way that supports the whole child, both physically and emotionally.

It is tempting to think that pain caused by emotional factors is less important than “real” medical issues, but this is not the case. The pain is real, even if its source is not physical. When parents minimise their children’s pain, saying things like “It’s just in your head,” children can feel misunderstood and alone. This can have the opposite effect, increasing stress-related symptoms.

It can be helpful to understand these symptoms as the body communicating something that the child is not able to express in words. In this sense, the body is doing the speaking. Taking the pain seriously helps the child feel heard and cared for.

Simple responses such as showing concern, offering comfort, and staying close can communicate safety and support.

For younger children, it can be helpful to respond to body-based symptoms of stress through the body itself. If a child is complaining of a headache or stomach pain, it may be possible to ask if they would like a gentle massage to help with the pain. It is important to ask permission before giving a massage so that the child feels in control and the touch feels nurturing and safe.

One idea that can be helpful with young children is offering to use a special lotion or oil that helps with pain. The exact type of lotion is not important—it doesn’t actually need to have pain-relieving properties. Any gentle moisturising cream or oil can be used. For a young child, the sense that something is being done specifically to help can support their experience of being heard, taken seriously, and cared for. This is not an act of deception, but a way of meeting the child at their level of understanding.

The massage itself can also become a moment of connection, creating a sense of safety and calm. During a gentle head or stomach massage, the parent can communicate reassurance, both through touch and through simple words. Phrases such as “I am here,” “You are safe,” or “I am sorry that you are in pain” can help the child feel supported and reduce their stress.

By addressing stress through body-based techniques, the child is not required to put into words what they are feeling. The stress can begin to settle simply through being held, comforted, and not being alone.

With older children and teenagers, a slightly different approach may be needed. They may benefit from a gentle explanation of how stress affects the body so they can understand their own symptoms.

They can then play an active part in thinking through how to calm their minds and bodies. Some may still find physical comfort, hugs or massage helpful, while others may prefer quiet company, listening to music, or simply sitting together. Gentle, calming activities can help the body begin to settle and allow the underlying stress to ease.

For both children and adults, it can be helpful to find creative ways of expressing emotional stress so that it does not build up in the body. Not everyone is able to express their feelings verbally, and there are many other ways to release stress through movement, play, music, art, and creativity.

Creative expression can begin to release what is being held internally, and often creates a pathway towards words. As this happens, children may gradually become able to name what they are feeling. This process is important, as words help to make sense of experience and bring a feeling of containment.

Over time, this helps children develop a fuller language for their inner world, so that feelings do not need to be carried only in the body. With support, they can begin to recognise, express, and move through what they are experiencing in a way that brings relief and connection.

The body often speaks what cannot yet be put into words, and this is something to respond to with care, presence, and understanding.

What to hold onto

During periods of stress, families often experience increased tension, emotional ups and downs, and changes in behaviour. These responses are a normal part of how people react to pressure.

What matters most in these moments is not perfection, but presence. When parents are able to stay calm and steady, children tend to feel safer and more regulated.

Strength does not come from striving, but from returning—again and again—to a place of rest in God, and from creating moments of connection, care, and closeness within the family. In this way, families can find stability together, even in uncertain times.