

## **Coping With Stress (For Families of Cult Victims)**

Concern about stress is not just a modern fad. While some level of stress is beneficial and energising, more stress than you can manage can have serious effects on your health and relationships. Negative effects of stress on your health include: anxiety, panic attacks, irregular heartbeat, raised blood pressure, insomnia and sleep disturbance, loss of appetite and weight loss, impatience, uncontrolled anger, nausea, stomach cramps, digestive problems, impaired immune system, feelings of despair, hopelessness, powerlessness, depression and a worsening of conditions such as asthma, migraine, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis and angina.

The good news is that our bodies are designed to cope with stress and we all have well developed, individual techniques for doing so. The bad news is that when a crisis hits us the shock and anxiety which result can override our normal stress coping mechanisms. We can forget to do the things we know have worked for us in the past. Discovering that someone you love is involved in a cult presents an acute level of 'crisis stress' and that high level of stress may continue for many months or years. It combines shock, overwhelming anxiety and a sense of being out of control, powerless or being at the mercy of someone else. Developing new (or rediscovering old) stress coping mechanisms will not actually change the situation you face, but they can help you to respond to it more effectively and protect your health and relationships so that you can put into practise the advice given by exit counsellors and others.

**Take action - however small:** We all react to stress in different ways and when some people discover that a loved one has joined a cult, they are overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation. There seems so much to do but they feel paralysed and unable to do anything. The good news is that taking any form of action, connected with the problem situation, creates a momentum and if someone can be encouraged to take action - reading a book, seeing a solicitor, making a phone call to a cult monitoring organisation, then the momentum created will make it easier to do more and more.

It is also the best cure for the feeling of being powerless and at the mercy of someone else's decisions. This can also be helpful for a situation that has been going on for a long period of time and has reached stalemate or stagnation. This situation can be equally stressful, but because you have been living with it for so long you are not always consciously aware of the harmful effect it is having. Reviewing the situation, going over past notes, re-reading a book, talking to someone from a cult monitoring group or a exit counsellor again can re-energise you, give you some fresh perspectives and may even lead to a new course of action.

**Get a support group together:** There will be people who by natural or more selective process gather around you to give you support. In an ideal world they would be your partner, your closest family members, your dearest friends. But they could be people you do not know terribly well, but who turn out to be unexpectedly helpful. They might be professionals, a doctor, a clergyman, your child's old teacher at school. It is a great stress reliever to be able to talk about the problem with those with whom you feel safe. Sometimes it will ease the burden of stress on a family if these are friends rather than other family members. People are generally reluctant to push help on those they think are coping well by themselves and for most people this is such an unfamiliar situation that they may not know what to ask or say after a while. Being direct about the kind of

help you need will help you get the kind of support you want and is less stressful in the long run than waiting for someone else to make the first move.

**Be very selective about who you confide in:** One obvious reason for this is security. But sharing the problem with everyone around us - at every possible opportunity, can actually increase our burden of stress. A sympathetic response can make us feel temporarily better but continually talking about the problem to all and sundry can actually reinforce our feelings of misery and powerlessness. It can wear us out. Also we expose ourselves to conflicting advice and to unsympathetic and ignorant remarks which can dramatically increase our feelings of guilt, anxiety and stress. Save your energies for those closest to you and, where possible, make educating others about cults a project for when you have more emotional energy and toughness

**Don't take someone's lack of support personally:** Sometimes the person closest to you just does not see the seriousness of the cult problem - they may even refuse to acknowledge it at all. When it is your spouse or partner who does this, it is particularly difficult to deal with. Refusing to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem may be their mechanism for coping with the stress around them, but it adds to your burden of stress considerably.

There are no easy answers here but, if a person is determined not to see the true nature of the problem once one has tried patiently and calmly, with proof and rational reasoning, to win them round - leave it. Arguing and confrontation is not going to change their minds and, if it is your spouse, will make home life a nightmare.

Rather than risk your marriage or relationship on this point try to get the support you need from elsewhere. Remind yourself of the other areas in your life where this person does support you and concentrate on those. Tell yourself it's not personal - it is not a rejection of you, it is just their way of coping with the situation. For friends, ask yourself: what makes this relationship worth saving? If their qualities and your feelings for them outweigh the hurt caused by their indifference, then concentrate on that.

**Create 'worry-free' zones:** Anxiety, if allowed, will expand to fill every part of your consciousness, waking and sleeping. A hundred scenarios whirl around in your brain: things you want to say, things you wish you hadn't said, possible outcomes, nightmare situations. This level of stress, if left to itself, will make a person very ill indeed. One way of coping with this is to force yourself to make artificial 'worry-free' zones in your time. In other words saying (out loud, if necessary) "For 5 minutes, for 20 minutes, for a whole hour etc., etc., I will not think about this situation". It seems incredibly unnatural, and it is. But it has proved a sanity preserver for many people. It also gets easier the more you practise it.

**Make time for yourself:** Any article on stress will tell you to do this and it is vital advice in a time of crisis. But when we are in the midst of this sort of problem we can feel exceptionally guilty about concentrating on anything else. We certainly feel we shouldn't be enjoying ourselves. However, when you are coping with somebody in a cult, it can become a situation that completely takes over family life. It can become an obsession and nothing will destroy your own health and the health of other family relationships faster. Every step you can take to protect your own health, mental and physical and that of your family is vital. Otherwise the cult member will not have a family left to come back to. So if you feel guilty - tell yourself you are doing it for them. Do whatever makes you feel good and takes your mind away from the problem, albeit

temporarily. Shopping, watching football, community activities, something you gave up when the crisis first hit - now is the time to take it up again. Look for those things which make you feel energised afterwards, where time passes in an instant. Or activities where you are forced to concentrate on what you are doing and nothing else (e.g. counted cross stitch, computer games, squash).

**Organise where you can:** The stress from concentrating on helping a loved one in a cult can make us feel less equipped to cope with other areas of our lives. The result - more stress. We are preoccupied, things get forgotten, important papers lost, appointments missed. Very quickly we can feel that life is coming apart at the seams. So organise where you can, when you can, in advance. Even if normally you have a really good memory increased stress will affect it, so don't trust to it alone. Help yourself - use a diary, make lists, reminder slips, post-it notes, anything that works. Writing things down helps marshal your thoughts, crossing things off proves to you that you have achieved something, when you are feeling at your most useless. This kind of problem can generate a huge amount of paperwork of one kind or another. Have it all together in one spot in a file or a box. De-cluttering at home and planning your time will help you tackle daily living more easily. When you are struggling under a heightened state of tension you do not need the little things of life, like mislaid car keys, making you explode.

**Keep a personal journal or notebook:** Some people have found that as well as keeping a diary of their loved one's cult involvement, it helps to also keep something more personal. Ideas and advice can come thick and fast, if you don't write them down you may lose track of them and end up feeling even more stressed. Writing down your worries and fears can free up your mind to think of something else too (or to get back to sleep). You may get a different perspective on them and feel more in control and able to manage better.

**Remove the 'drains':** Some things (and some people) just drain away your energy and resolve, leaving you even more stressed out. At the same time as you are doing things that build you up and which give you emotional and physical energy, remove the things that are sapping it from you. If you can get out of stressful engagements and commitments, now is the time to do it. Force yourself to reject the guilt involved. You are doing this to protect yourself and your family from overload. You have more important things to concentrate on. Also, now is the time to avoid taking on major life style changes or projects with a high risk factor.

**Try to maintain a balanced diet:** Stress can rob us of our appetite, the desire to cook or even shop for food. Our health can suffer in a relatively short time. It is a vicious circle. Stress robs us of our energy and the fact that we aren't eating properly makes it even worse. So make use of the short cuts available to modern man. 'Ready meals' are better than nothing and can be made more balanced by adding salad. They are ready before the desire to eat leaves you. Get things in that are easy to prepare. This doesn't have to be 'junk food' - a sandwich and some fruit can suffice. But even 'junk food' is better than not eating very much at all. A multi-vitamin/multi-mineral supplement can also help.

**Make use of 'stress-busting foods':** Foods which are rich in B vitamins (tuna, whole-wheat products, almonds, brown rice, broccoli, peas, lentils, eggs, soya, marmite) can help our nervous system function better and deal with stress more efficiently. Levels of iron are diminished by stress, and can lead to the symptoms of anaemia - such as lack of energy and impaired memory. So choose iron rich foods such as broccoli, green leafy vegetables, red meat, cocoa and pulses.

The exhaustion and weariness we feel, when we are stressed out, can sometimes lead us to reach for something quick, fast and sugary that will give us an immediate energy surge. But, our body responds to the sudden sugar high by releasing a large amount of insulin to counteract it - resulting in an energy low as our sugar level drops dramatically. The body reacts to this by releasing adrenaline into the blood stream, something we already have more than enough of because of our increased stress level. Again it's a vicious circle.

Choose instead foods that have a 'low glycaemic value', which release their sugar into the body more slowly - so that you get a steady and sustained release of energy rather than a sudden high followed by a sudden low. A general rule of thumb is that these are 'whole' or unrefined foods, an apple or an orange rather than a glass of juice, a wholemeal and low sugar biscuit rather than one made with white flour and lots of sugar.

In a high stress situation you should not be trying to tackle a complete change of diet but develop an awareness of what foods will make you feel better in the long run. It doesn't have to be complicated - it can be as simple as having egg on toast for a snack rather than a couple of doughnuts. Stimulants such as tea and coffee too can fool the body into feeling more energised. It is pretty standard advice to say use them as sparingly as you can - giving them up entirely may create more stress than you need right now!

**Cultivate good sleep habits:** Insomnia or a disturbed sleep pattern is one of the most common signs of being in a stress situation. Many people feel their worst at night. All the usual advice for what is called 'good sleep hygiene' is applicable here - avoid tea, coffee, cola drinks at least four hours before bedtime, allow yourself time to wind down before getting into bed (create bedtime rituals that tell your body 'it's time to sleep'), make your bed-room a work-free sanctuary (definitely don't do cult related work in there), a warm bath before bed time helps to relax the body (not too hot or it has the opposite affect), don't read or watch anything stimulating before bedtime. If you wake up and have trouble getting back to sleep, don't lie there stewing, get up if you can, make a drink, keep warm and try again later. Diet can help too. The traditional bedtime milky drink works because it contains tryptophan, an amino acid that the body uses in the creation of serotonin, a brain chemical that makes us feel calm and relaxed. If you can't face a milky drink, yoghurt, bananas, peanuts, dates and turkey all are rich in tryptophan (but eat them early to avoid indigestion!)

**Find time to exercise and relax:** Rather than making you feel more exhausted, exercise can actually give you more energy to tackle the problems you face. This may be because when you exercise the body produces endorphins, chemicals which affect the brain giving you a feeling of happiness and elation. The all round health benefits of exercise will also help offset some of the negative effects of stress too, such as a raised blood pressure. It doesn't have to be sport. It could be going for a walk in the park, a gentle swim, gardening etc.

Setting aside time just to relax can feel totally wasteful. But again, tell yourself that this is vital to help you continue with fighting the problem that faces you. Having time set aside in the day when the body and mind are just resting can dramatically reduce the harmful affects of stress in a very measurable way (reduced heart rate, lowered blood pressure etc.). Twenty minutes or half an hour a day, relaxing with your mind focused on nothing in particular at all is all you may need. Some people like to incorporate this with prayer or a religious practice, but just sitting and

listening to music or the birds singing can be very effective. It isn't easy, especially when you are dealing with the anxiety levels produced by having a member of your family in a cult, but it will leave you much better equipped for the long haul.

**Get professional help:** If you find yourself simply unable to cope anymore, seek professional help. A GP may not know the first thing about cults, but he/she is trained to spot the signs of acute stress and depression and can offer medical help or general counselling. It is a particularly good idea to have a regular check up with your GP, especially because some of the physical effects of stress are so serious - raised blood pressure, increased susceptibility to strokes etc.. Added to that, nothing happens in a vacuum and you may also be dealing with other issues as well as the cult situation, for example, bereavement, physical illness or caring for an elderly relative. Grab whatever help you can from social services and voluntary groups.

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