

## K-State experts: Stress 'doesn't have to control your life'



K-State family and child development experts say that understanding stress and ways to reduce it can help to alleviate its negative effects.

### Training for extension agents aims to help Kansas families

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MANHATTAN, Kan. – McKenzie Zimmermann knows first-hand that it's tough for families to talk about things that cause stress in life.

"When I was growing up, I never had a conversation with my parents or my family about what stress is," said Zimmermann, a Kansas State University graduate student in the Department of Applied Human Services.

"I had to learn on my own about stress from my teachers and my friends. But even then, I did not have a holistic picture of what family stress -- or stress, in general -- was."

Zimmermann's world opened up to the topic later in life when her parents divorced. From that point, "I saw stress in a different way," she said. "I had a first hand account of how my parents' stress event impacted me and my sisters."

Zimmermann, who is also an extension assistant with K-State Research and Extension's family and child development program, is now studying ways to help families become more resilient, and is teaching extension agents in Kansas how they can help families in their communities.

"Stress is universal," Zimmermann said. "Everyone, at one point or another, has experienced stress. It does not have to control your life if you are knowledgeable about it and can learn ways to reduce it."

Zimmermann has studied family stress under the watchful eye of Elaine Johannes, an associate professor and youth development specialist with K-State Research and Extension. The pair recently published a guide, called [Stress and the Family System](#), in which they outline ways that families can become more resilient toward stress.

"When all family members play an active role in family strengthening activities, they are able to learn together, have discussions that are family specific, and better understand their role within their family," Zimmermann said. "Plus, any time a family spends participating in activities together, the likelihood that their bonds will strengthen, their communication will increase, and their ability to listen and trust one another will increase."

She said that families respond to stress in various ways. Some families argue, while others try to ignore the stress and shut down. "And then there are some families who have learned how to successfully handle their stress," Zimmermann said.

She lists five ideas that families, or anyone, can adopt when facing stressful situations:

- **Take a second.** Whether the stress is positive (such as a wedding or new birth) or negative, it takes a toll on one's mental, physical and emotional state. Slow down to process the event and embrace your feelings about the stressor.
- **Pinpoint where the stress is coming from.** Identify the disruption so you can best identify solutions.
- **Identify your support system.** The family should know who they can go to for help. Knowing where to find help decreases feelings of being alone during a stressful time.
- **Do some damage control.** Check in with others in the family that may be affected by the stressor to see how they are feeling. Then, talk to other members of the family to see how they are doing.
- **Take care of your mental and physical health.** It's good advice always, but especially during a time of stress, to get enough sleep, drink water and eat nutritious foods. Seek professional help, if needed. Zimmermann said when families actively talk about stress and how they will handle it, they build greater resiliency. "Resiliency," she said, "is a net that can catch you when the events around you are trying to push you down."

"But building resiliency takes time and patience. It is incredibly important to teach children how to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviors to build their resiliency net. When they are stronger individuals, the family will probably be stronger, too."