

Stress Management with Humor and Practicality

Excerpts from a workshop and address delivered by nationally known speaker and author, Naomi Haines Griffith, at Casey Family Services Foster Parent 2000 conference.

Never do anything that once being done will lead you to tell a lie. I think that a tremendous amount of our stress comes from the fact that everybody in this room is a liar. We lie to ourselves first of all. We tell things that are not true, and in the work we're in, we just can't do that.

Mercy is when you have power and you choose not to use it. And instead, you use kindness.

Never do anything that once being done will lead you to tell a lie. The tremendous amount of stress that we all have in our marriages, in our relationships with our children, in our relationships at work is grounded in the fact that we're not truthful.

Working with foster children is a major trap with not telling the truth. That we, in our zeal to help children, in our zeal to make things better, are not always truthful. Another piece of this is honesty with kindness.

Doing this work when your heart is not in it is also untruthful. If you're doing this and you don't want to, it'll become a tremendous amount of stress for you. If it is a burden, it's not right.

You have to be able to give and receive empathy. You need some people in your life who have empathy for you. That's a tremendous gift we give each other. It's having people in your life—and you're being that kind of person with others. We're in a business where you're pouring this out all the time. And I think a lot of the stress comes from the fact that we don't do enough to replenish that with each other. But I need that in my life.

We are a product of a lot of things that have happened to us and people's help and encouragement. We need to be able to refocus outside ourselves into being able to see the gifts that have been given to us.

One of the major pitfalls in your work is that we begin to get a victim's mentality ourselves. Nobody appreciates us. We work hard. We put up with all this stuff. And we get into this little mode of feeling like a victim. If we can diversify some of our contacts and put ourselves in some different situations, it will help us.

A lot of our stress is that you're basically trying to secure services; you're trying to get questions answered. You're sitting in waiting rooms. You're waiting on somebody to call you. Be prepared to wait.

We are in the business of incremental change. A very significant part of our ability to deal with kids with problems and families is that we have to look for little tiny changes. One of the hardest lessons I learned was taking a tremendous amount of joy in very small changes and waiting.

Parents are often unable to recognize any progress so the child receives no praise for any accomplishment. The children that you're dealing with have never received recognition, praise and some sort of a confirmation for incremental changes. That's one of the major ways that we can make a contribution. And in the meantime, it will be rejuvenating to you.

Develop a forgiving attitude about the world. I almost burned myself out being angry at what families should do and what parents should do. And over these years, one of the things I've learned is forgiveness.

When we develop a forgiving attitude about the parents and about the children, we also start to forgive ourselves. And I would suggest that a lot of our stress comes from an indictment of our own shortcomings of feeling guilty. I had to learn to forgive myself for not being able to fix every child. A big piece of relieving stress is forgiving us and letting some things go.

The treatment of the child begins the moment that we make contact with that family. And then everybody in that child's life becomes a part of the treatment team. Because of everything that happens to that child once the abuse is diagnosed, identified, and action is taken, everybody in that child's life becomes a part of the treatment.

You are the one who is in control of yourself. That's about all that you have going for you. Sometimes it comes down to is outlasting them and you can only do that when you yourself can stay in that adult role.

Don't get mad when I tell you—get up fifteen minutes earlier. Let me tell you why that's true. When we get up in the morning and we're running from the time your feet hit the floor, you are not in control the rest of the day. Now, that's just fact. When you get up and you're behind when you're behind, you're never in control.

Figure out something you would like to do for yourself that would improve you--something that you could give yourself that would be a boost--whatever it is.

The most critical piece of saving yourself and keeping your sanity is a sense of humor. If you don't have a sense of humor, you're going to get old and ugly. I'm talking about seeing the humor in life in yourself, especially. Just find the humor in something. Getting outside yourself and letting yourself go and laugh. And children love that. They love laughter. They love the intimacy of humor. Of little shared funny things. I want these children to look back on life and growing up with some things that they can laugh about. They have come from homes where there was no humor. There was ridicule. There was sarcasm. There was hurtful teasing and hazing. But there was not any humor.

Let yourself go. It's a gift.