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## Mother and child

Moms and their kids share a unique bond, but busy lifestyles can create stress, disrupting these precious relationships. Wellness experts offer assurances, however, that following sound strategies for managing modern life can help ensure healthy, happy families despite our busy schedules.

"There never seems to be enough time," says Lisa Martin, author of *Briefcase Moms, 10 Proven Practices to Bal-*

ance. "When we examine that feeling more closely, there are issues around expectations. What are the expectations that you have for the roles you play? Sometimes those expectations are out of alignment with what is realistic, and that can contribute to guilt, which is very stressful to moms."

"In spite of the fact that today's moms are often doing two or three jobs (in the home and out), and doing a better job raising their kids than previous generations, they feel

guilty," agrees Robin Alter, a psychologist with expertise in children and families. "One of the biggest stressors for women is guilt."

Self-care is essential for wellness and for coping in the face of stress, and moms often put themselves at the bottom of their priority list, operating in a state of low-grade burnout. According to Dr. Alter, our children are noticing. "I've done between 4,000 and 5,000 psychological assessments, and when I ask

children if they want to have a family of their own when they grow up, their response lately is, 'No way!' They're looking at the adults in their lives, and those adults aren't having any fun."

Self-awareness is key to alleviating the stress in our lives, says Ms. Martin, but is not always easy to achieve. "If you're feeling stressed, you can't always focus on what's causing it. Step back for a moment to create some space for reflection or quiet thought.

Ask yourself, 'What do I want, what am I feeling, where do I want to go, what do I need?' We have the answers to these questions, but they aren't accessible to us when we're running like a hamster on the wheel to nowhere."

Often, she says, the most important question of all is, "How do I lower my standards to a level that's realistic?" We can't have it all at the same time – but we can have what matters most. It's vital to understand what that is and to be in alignment with our priorities."

When it comes to managing busy lifestyles and stress, good nutritional strategies are also crucial for both moms and their families, says Joey Shulman, registered nutritionist. "Kids and adults both perform better when they're fuelled properly."

Too many moms are overweight and under-fuelled because they're lurching on the crusts from their kid's grilled cheese sandwiches, she says. "They're dehydrated, not working out and skipping meals – so they suffer from

sugar cravings. I had a woman in here this morning who lost 10 pounds. When I first met her, her shoulders were slumped and she looked a bit grey – today I thought, 'Oh, there's the energetic you!'"

To maximize energy and minimize mood swings, says Dr. Shulman, "Don't eat refined flours or sugar; high-glycemic-index carbohydrates negatively impact blood sugar, energy and mood, and contribute to weight gain. Do load your diet with omega-3 fats, such as walnuts, cold water fish, fish oils, flax seeds and flax seed oil. Your brain needs these healthy fats to thrive."

Most important of all, says Dr. Alter, is to make fun a top priority. "Unfortunately, mothers today aren't taking the time to just enjoy their kids. Doing so has so many beneficial effects: kids' self-esteem improves when they see that their parents are enjoying them. It helps parents alleviate stress; when you laugh with your kids or play a game, you forget about all the things you're worried about. You just enjoy the moment." ■

### Hey mom, are your kids stressed out?

Stress can affect a child's physical, emotional and intellectual well-being. Here are five tips to help parents help their kids deal with stress.

Talk through it. Encourage children to have positive self-talk. Suggest they imagine a good buddy sitting on

their shoulder who cheers for them and says positive things.

Set an example. Talk out loud when you face a stressful situation, and manage it in a healthy way. "I'm frustrated, but I'm just going to get this chore done."

Teach relaxation. Deep breathing is an effective stress reliever. Teach your children to take a deep breath in through their nose on a slow count of four; then, exhale through their mouth on a slow count of six.

Choose your time. Find out what's upsetting your child by talking to them when they are calm. Ask open questions, such as "I know there are things that upset you sometimes. Can you tell me about them?"

Try not to overload kids with activities. Sometimes, quiet time is the best cure for stress.

For more information on how to help kids beat stress, visit [www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org)  
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### Insight

## Top psychiatrist offers ways for single moms to deal with a constellation of stressors

### Q&A Dr. Ellen Lipman

Associate Professor, Division of Child Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, McMaster University

**Q:** How common are single parent families in Canada, and what are the primary stressors they face?

**A:** In Canada, about 15 per cent of families are single parent families, according to the 2006 census; over 80 per cent of those actually are headed by single moms. About one-eighth of Canadian families are headed by a single mother.

There's a lot of variability among single moms and the pathway to becoming single



moms. But most single mothers are poor, with income that is less than half of that of moms in two-parent families. Many have lower levels of education. Single moms report more chronic health problems, and there are higher levels of

depression. They tend to report higher levels of dissatisfaction with multiple areas of their life, and high family stress levels. These moms are also less likely to access mental health services. In addition, their kids also have higher rates of difficulties with emotional, academic and behavioural problems.

They're more likely to feel overwhelmed, which makes it hard – when they're feeling very stressed – to deliver consistent parental support. As well, living in a family that's poor means you don't have the same kind of clothing or resources, and that can have a negative impact on kids.

For many single mothers, it is a constellation of stressors.

These women are dealing with complex, multi-problem situations.

**Q:** What are some of the strategies that can help support single moms?

**A:** It's really important for parents to take care of themselves. If you are in bad shape yourself, there's no way you can do best at being a parent. Sometimes parents don't feel that way – they feel they have to do things for their children. It makes sense to step back and ensure they're taking care of themselves. They're then better able to be available, consistent and helpful to their children.

For example, if they have a depression, we know that

there are some good treatments with good evidence to support them.

Often, single moms haven't had good role models as parents, so another way they can have a very positive impact on their circumstances is to enrol in a parenting course. We know there's good evidence that certain kinds of parenting courses can be really helpful for child behaviour. And parents can feel better about being an effective parent.

With these complex, multi-problem situations, it can be overwhelming. Sometimes, it can make sense – if you're a mom in this position or if you're a support person working with a mom in this

position – to focus on one or two of the issues and try to work those out, rather than trying to work out everything all at once. It may make things easier. ■

*Dr. Ellen Lipman is a child psychiatrist and is an Associate Professor in the Division of Child Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, McMaster University. She is a core member of the Offord Centre for Child Studies. Dr. Lipman's clinical work includes consulting for the Child and Youth Mental Health Program, McMaster Children's Hospital, Chedoke Site, and with family physicians as part of the Family Health Teams, Mental Health and Nutrition Program.*

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