

'Self-awareness and stress reduction' transcript

About this transcript

This is a transcript of the 'Self-awareness and stress reduction' video which forms part of our advice and guidance for parents and carers in conflict or separating. The entire resource can be found at www.annafreud.org/conflict.

This transcript was created on 8th March 2021 and should be accessible to screen-readers. If you have difficulties with this transcript, please contact network@annafreud.org.

Self-awareness and stress reduction

I'm Emma Morris and a member of the Family Ties team. I'm going to be talking here about self-awareness and stress reduction. Now, the idea that if we're stressed out, we cope less well is a pretty obvious one. But parents in conflict are usually under particularly high levels of stress. And what's more, with covid and associated conditions, such as lockdown, those stressors can be intensified.

And what this diagram next to me shows or attempts to show is that, if emotional arousal is very high, and what I mean by emotional arousal are strong feelings of stress, upset, anxiety, anger. If emotional arousal is very high, our ability to mentalize is low. Now, by mentalize, what I mean is our ability to understand our own thoughts, feelings, intentions, behaviors, what we're doing and why we're doing them, and others people's thoughts, feelings, intentions, behaviors, what they're doing and why they're doing it. Now, if you're going to do well in [managing] conflict, you need to be able to bring your emotional arousal down, your level of emotional arousal down low enough so that you can access the part of your brain that helps you understand the intentions and motivations both of yourself and other people. In other words, the part of the brain that helps you mentalize. Otherwise, the conflict is likely to be unresolved and most likely to escalate.

Now, unfortunately what we can't do is control a lot of the stresses out there, the stresses in our day-to-day lives. But what we can do is work hard to build into our lives ways of managing emotional arousal. So, developing self-awareness. Awareness of our own stresses and triggers and to build in strategies that brings our emotional arousal down so that we stay more often in what's called this window of tolerance. Now that's the sort of light green box in the diagram next to me. So that we stay in a place where we are able to access the part of our brain that we need in order to make sense of conflict, to sort out conflict, and most importantly, to protect children from conflict.

So for the rest of this recording, I'm just going to go through various ways that parents and their social support can work together to keep parents' emotional arousal down low enough to a level where they're able to manage conflict a bit more successfully, and to ensure that their children don't become exposed to or involved in, parental conflict.

Now, first of all it can be helpful to know your triggers. Memories and patterns from the past that belong to the past, can trigger us in the here and now. Something reminds us of something that's happened to us before or in a previous relationship, we might not even realise that this memory has been triggered but it can lead us to strong reactions, strong feelings that then knocks us offline and stop us being able to think properly about what's going on and what we should do about it.

Sometimes, however, we don't know where triggers come from, they can just be specific to us. Sometimes, just little things that particularly get to us, we might not really understand why, but most people are aware of the things that particularly annoy them, or they're particularly sensitive to. Now, being aware of those things means that you can look out for them, and when you feel the strong feeling that goes with them, you can name it as such, and step away and work with your social support to bring the feeling down a little bit more, before you step back into any interaction with the other parent.

Another thing you can do is to think, 'Is there any way I can take the pressure off of myself? Are there any life stressors that I can reduce?' Now, some of the big life stressors you might not be able to do anything about. But think with your social network, could you, for example, arrange a regular child care agreement that means that you get a little bit of time to yourself or with friends? Or are you the sort of person that has very high expectations on yourself in your work, or in your housework? Would it make it easier, would you feel better if you just, even if its temporary, take that pressure off yourself a little bit and reduce the stress in your life?

Another thing it might be helpful to think with your social network about is your use of coping strategies. How do you manage stress? How do you manage strong feelings and upset? Do you have good coping strategies or are some of your coping strategies less helpful? Could you build on some of the strategies that you already have? Talk with your social network: what do they do to cope? Can they share any of their coping strategies or support you in using or giving up your strategies if they're less helpful?

It sometimes can be helpful to think about coping strategies in broadly two camps, there's strategies that specifically work to bring your emotional arousal and stress down, and they're quite good for use in the here and now. Some examples of those emotions-focused skills are labelled in the slide next to me (exercise, have a bath, meditate). The second broad camp of coping strategies are problem-focused coping strategies, so ways of approaching the stresses and difficulties in your life, that help them feel more manageable and less overwhelming, and obviously that then has a knock-on effect to your stress levels.

Another thing to think about is: is there any of the conflict that you can let go? Is there conflict that is ongoing, harmful and unresolved, and unlikely to be resolved, that you think, even temporarily, you can learn to tolerate, you can learn to tolerate the difference, you can learn to tolerate that there's more than one truth out there, and accept that it is what it is, for now at least, and let go of it, even if it is just for the moment, in order for you to manage better day to day.

Finally, and this is really important, when parents are under really high levels of stress, it can sometimes have an impact on their ability to parent. So, when emotional arousal is very high and parents aren't able to think so carefully about what they're doing and why they're doing it, they can, inadvertently, end up exposing their child to conflict or involving their child in the conflict. So, they may end up having a blazing row in front of their child or in earshot of their child or they may get off the phone to the other parent and criticise them, 'Oh your dad is an idiot, he doesn't know what he's doing' or they may come away from a conflict and turn round, it may not be a verbal conflict, it could be an email they've read for instance, and because they're feeling stressed out, they may turn round and snap at their child. This happens, but the good thing is its never too late to repair that sort of thing, and it's so important that parents repair it when it does happen. So, when parents emotional arousal has come back down a bit, usually they can think, do you know what, that didn't go so well, shouldn't have said that, or shouldn't have done that. Now, to take the time to have a conversation with the child about what happened and why is so important in those situations. To say to the child, 'Those things I said about your dad, I didn't mean them, I was just feeling really cross'. Or to say to the child, 'I snapped at you just then, its because I had an argument with your mum, its nothing to do with you, those feelings were nothing to do with you, that was between me and your mum'. Or 'sorry you had to see that, we shouldn't have argued in front of you. That's our private relationship and we should keep those arguments away from you, and I'm sorry for that.' To say those things can be really hard for parents but what they do, is relieve the child of the burden and helps them make sense of what is going on. It helps them feel free of their parent's conflict, it helps relieve them of worries that they might be the cause of conflict, or that they're at the centre of the conflict, and it's somehow up to them to peace keep and sort it out somehow. Children shouldn't feel that and by repairing things like this, you're helping relieve them of that burden.