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Ask the Expert Chat Series

January 13, 2010 – Emotional Stressors of Parenting a Child with ADHD

Moderators – NRC Staff

Expert – Andrea Chronis-Tuscano, PhD

Moderator 1: Welcome to today's Ask the Expert chat, "Emotional Stressors of Parenting a Child with ADHD." Our expert this afternoon is Andrea Chronis-Tuscano.

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 2002 from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She completed her training with an APA-accredited internship at the University of Chicago, where she received the Zanvel Klein Academic Award for excellence in clinical research and practice.

She then joined the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland in 2002, and now directs the Maryland Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Program. She is also an Adjunct Professor of Pediatrics at the George Washington University School of Medicine, Children's National Medical Center. Her many achievements have lead her to being a recipient of the American Psychological Association Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology Junior Faculty Mentoring and Development Award as well as the CHADD Young Research Scientist Award.

Thank you Dr. Chronis-Tuscano for joining us! Are you ready to begin?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Yes. I am happy to be here today to discuss ways to manage the stressors of parenting a child with ADHD.

Celia: It seems that kids with ADHD have a good week than a bad week, etc. As the emotions of the ADHD child increase it seems like the whole household's emotions also go up, are there any ideas on how to de-escalate the household stress?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: As difficult as it is, it is helpful if the rest of the family can find ways to not let your child with ADHD's mood affect everyone else's mood. Some strategies you can use are to step away for a second, use pleasant imagery or relaxation, and to make sure that you are getting needed breaks throughout the week. You staying cool and positive is essential to your child with ADHD and the rest of the household!

And you can remind yourself that things will get better. They always do!

Jeffparent_daught12: My 12 year old daughter gets "out of control" in the mornings and evenings. (Before and after Meds). It's very disruptive for our family and younger daughter who does not have ADHD. We tend to yell a lot at those times to try and control things. Any better solution?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Mornings and bedtime are often the toughest times. You may dread those times and be on edge before anything even happens. Are there certain things that help you to stay calm? Perhaps exercise, quiet music, or positive self-talk? If so, try to use those things before your child gets up or during the morning routine to keep calm. The trick is to keep yourself calm and positive. It can have a positive impact on your entire household!

The other thing I recommend is to carefully evaluate your morning and evening routines to see if there is anything you can do in terms of structure, rules, and incentives that can make those tricky times go more smoothly.

Gail: My daughter is in 8th grade, the school year isn't half over, and I am burnt out. She so frequently has missing assignments, doesn't manage her time well at home, etc. Our relationship consists almost entirely of talking about and managing her schoolwork. Do you have any advice to bring us more peace and help our relationship?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Homework is another one of those times of day which really tax your child's attentional and organizational capabilities. Again, I would take a two pronged approach. First, make sure you are in the right state of mind. Negative thinking or anxious/stressed feelings can make a tough situation worse. Take care of yourself and do whatever it takes to keep yourself calm before and during homework time.

Second, structure the homework time to limit distractions, keep the same homework routine each day (same time, same place, etc), break down multi-step tasks, and provide reinforcers (praise and incentives) for completing homework each step of the way!

Ashascielzo: My question relates to how to avoid getting so frustrated and angry with my daughter. She never takes "no" for an answer and will repeatedly ask the same question -- whether it's about having a dessert, watching a TV show, etc. I get increasingly frustrated with her and eventually snap at her or get angry. I regret it later.

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: We work with parents on their own thoughts and feelings which may impact their parenting. You may find yourself extremely stressed and thinking negatively about interactions with your daughter, which may make those interactions even more difficult. Here are a few ways you can help yourself stay calm.

First, make sure you schedule some pleasant activities for yourself each day. This may simply mean listening to a favorite CD, taking time out to exercise, or working on a project (such as scrapbooking or woodworking). You may need to ask for help from others in order to make this feasible.

Second, try to be aware of your thoughts. Often, negative thinking can become automatic and can make us quicker to react negatively in situations with our kids. Try to catch those negative thoughts and replace them with more positive thoughts. It can really make a difference in how you react to your children.

Moderator 1: CHADD local groups provide support and networking with other individuals who understand the difficulties of parenting a child with ADHD. In addition to supplying each other with local resources and support, the meetings usually have a speaker who talks about current events or research in the ADHD community. Each local group is different, so use the CHADD website to find the group closest to you. To get started, visit: www.chadd.org/chapterlocator.

Trish Mornings: School days are our most difficult time. Our 8 year old wakes up wound for sound and ready for combat. He takes Concerta on school days, but until it begins to work, our mornings are very difficult even though we follow a set routine every day. Any tips/recommendations on how we can improve our mornings? Thank you!

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Yes, talking with friends or other parents who are dealing with similar issues can be incredibly helpful. Again, you should first make sure that you are taking care of yourself--that means getting enough sleep and trying your best to wake up in a positive state of mind.

Next, structure the morning time. Make sure you have enough time to get everything done. Do what you can the night before, like making lunches, packing the backpack, etc. Of course, teaching your child to do this as well can be very valuable.

Then, try to keep the same structure and routines every day so your child knows what comes next. For example, get up at the same time, then dress for school, have breakfast, brush teeth, etc. It can be very helpful to praise your child for every step of the routine which is completed. Some parents also offer small incentives, like a special treat in the child's lunch.

It can be helpful to post the steps of the morning routine on a dry erase board and have the child check off each step as it is completed.

Moderator 1: In her answer above, Dr. Chronis-Tuscano mentioned talking with friends and other parents who are dealing with similar issues. One way to gain insight from parents who have experienced these situations themselves is to register for CHADD's [Parent to Parent program](#). Parent to Parent courses are offered in local communities and online, provide educational information and support for individuals and families dealing with ADHD and learning to navigate the challenges of ADHD across the lifespan.

Celia: My husband and I find ourselves sometimes lashing out at each other to avoid confrontation with our son and often make the situation even worse, how can we stop this pattern?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: That is a common problem that many parents of children with ADHD deal with. The key is to avoid disagreement in front of your children. I know it is hard, but trying to present a "united front" is really essential.

Take time out together to have fun, so that your job as parents is not all work and no play. Discuss childrearing issues when things are quiet, not only when there is a problem with your child. This can help you both to be more rational and problem solving oriented.

You may not always be on the same page but it is important to learn to communicate and problem solve with one another calmly and effectively.

Celia: As our ADHD child gets older, he is 9 now, it is apparent that we have to set different rules and boundaries with him versus his brothers, this causes stress for everyone, do you have any suggestions as to what to do?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: It is great that you are thinking in terms of your child's ever-changing developmental level! Things do change as your child matures, but structure, routines, and consistent consequences are always important for the child with ADHD.

There are some rules that will apply to everyone in the household, like no verbal or physical aggression and respecting others. However, there may also be new rules that apply to your 9 year old and not his younger siblings. That is OK. We all have different things to work on.

Consequences may also need to change. Praise works for everyone (even adults appreciate a pat on the back!) but time-outs may become less effective around this age (for some children) and you may need to move to removal of privileges like TV, computer time, etc. as a consequence for more serious misbehaviors.

Amanda: I want to know how to find time away for taking breaks or going on a "date" with my husband to take care of our relationship, when we have a hard time getting help from grandparents and babysitters are so hard to come by? Suggestions for finding babysitting help for young ADHD kids without costing an arm or a leg?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: I know that many parents struggle with this. It is absolutely necessary to get away sometimes, though, for your mental health and your relationship. It may be helpful to contact a local college to see if there are students who would be willing to babysit. You can teach the babysitter to use some of the same strategies you use to manage your child's behavior.

And consistency in the babysitter is essential so that s/he can get used to your child and to using the strategies that work with him or her. Some of you may also have a family member or friend who is willing to listen to your suggestions and to use the strategies you find most helpful.

Ashascielzo: What about the other way around? Where the stress the parents might be feeling (being tired, financial stress, marital stress, etc.) seems to be picked up by the ADHD child who is sensitive.

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Parent-child interactions are a two-way street! That is why it is so important to take care of yourselves. Being tired is a hallmark of parenting. Make sure you get to bed on time, exercise, eat right. Pay attention to your relationship and seek help if needed. Do your best to reduce whatever stressors in your life can be controlled.

Of course, there are stressors that cannot be controlled. For most of us, there is something that helps us feel better. Again, listening to music, exercising, seeing friends, staying involved in a hobby. These things often go when we become parents but it is essential that you schedule at least a little time to do things that help you manage stress better. If you don't take care of you, it will surely impact your interactions with your child.

Laurie: I have a fifteen year old daughter with ADHD who is a freshman in high school. She takes medication for school and is very bright, but I manage the rest of her life so she can focus on school work. She tries to overcompensate academically so that she doesn't feel different because of ADHD. At what point do I let go without her becoming discouraged so that I can have time to take care of myself?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: As your child with ADHD enters adolescence, it is difficult to know how hands-on to be and how much to let them do things for themselves. You want to give your daughter the skills to eventually manage things on her own, as she enters adulthood. Perhaps there are strategies you can work with her on, rather than doing things for her. Things like keeping a schedule book, to-do lists, and post-it reminders.

You can encourage and support her in using these strategies, and eventually fade the extent to which you are monitoring and structuring things for her. This should give you a bit more time for yourself. And when you take care of yourself, you are teaching her to take care of herself.

Moderator 1: Before our next question, you should know that the NRC produces a series of Information Sheets and all of these "[What We Know](#)" Sheets are found at help4adhd.org, in the "[About ADHD](#)" section, including our [WWK #20A](#) and [#20B](#) on ADHD and Teens

SSF: My husband and I are involved in family behavioral therapy with our son so we are all on the same page as to how to help our child with ADHD. However, I find that while this therapy helps my husband and I understand our son's needs, it then creates a void in our relationship which leads to more stress and tension for the entire family. I feel like our needs as parents are not being met from this therapy. How do we shift the focus of our family therapy sessions from our son's behavioral needs and our parenting skills, to what our family and relationship needs are as one entity?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: I would first recommend that you speak with your therapist about these feelings and to share your goals with him/her. A good therapist will take your goals into consideration and shift the focus as your needs change.

You will likely need to continue to focus on managing your son's behavior, but perhaps you can take some time each session or during alternating weeks, to focus on the family as a whole.

Sharon_R: My teenage daughter's most significant impairment is lack of time awareness. All day, every day, I am trying unsuccessfully to help her keep to a schedule while trying to keep the household on a schedule. It is really exhausting and frustrating and I just want to give up. Any suggestions on how I can cope?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: This too is a hallmark of ADHD and can be very difficult for a parent to deal with. One thing you can try is a sports watch and/or PDA (if you have the means) which beeps to remind her of things throughout the day. When setting the daily routine, specify times that each step of the routine needs to be completed and praise her for meeting those goals. The watch or PDA can be useful here. By keeping the same routine and the same timing of events throughout the day, things should get easier. And, Sharon, be sure to take care of yourself!

Moderator 1: Being a CHADD member not only provides valuable products and services, such as Attention magazine, to you and your family; it also supports CHADD's work on behalf of individuals with ADHD at the local, state and national level. Join CHADD today: www.chadd.org/join.

Imbourn: Transitions seem to be difficult for my son who has ADHD. We use a countdown, and let him know at that time what the consequences will be if he doesn't stop at "0", but I find myself getting frustrated when things escalate even after spelling things out for him. Any suggestions?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: You may have a lot of built-up frustration. As I mentioned before, you may even be stressed before the countdown happens which makes you quicker to react when your son does not listen.

Parents sometimes expect the worst before even asking the child to do something. Keep watch over that type of negative thinking. Try to remain calm and neutral in these situations. Whatever helps you to do that is what you should do. For example, count to ten, take deep breaths, imagine yourself on a beautiful beach, whatever it takes!

Also, remind yourself that your child is not being difficult on purpose. He has difficulty staying on task and completing whatever you asked him to do. Staying calm and neutral can help you to avoid escalation.

momof2: My 6 y/o son takes a stimulant to help manage his ADHD. When the medication is working, he's easy for all to be around. Before and after the meds, however, he's loud, wild, intrusive, impulsive, etc. It's like living with two different children in one body - a Jekyll and Hyde experience. We all respond to him differently when he's calm vs. wild and it feels stressful for all of us. Any advice on how to cope with the very different behavior sets that come from being on and off meds?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Like I said before, staying calm and neutral is key here. You may come to expect that he is going to be difficult when he is off meds, and you may find yourself on edge or reacting more strongly. Keep yourself in check and remind yourself that things are more difficult right now because his meds are not active, and that things will improve when his meds do kick in.

I also cannot emphasize enough that you should be using your behavioral parenting techniques consistently throughout the day, even if your child is medicated. Stimulant medication has no lasting effects when it wears off, which is at most 12 hours.

Morning routine time and bedtime are often the most difficult for children who have difficulty organizing and staying on task. This is when your behavioral techniques are most important. By behavioral techniques, I mean keeping a consistent schedule and routine, having clear expectations, and using consistent positive and negative consequences in response to your child's positive and negative behavior. Good luck.

flmom: Can you address how parents of ADHD children often deal with guilt and second guessing themselves. The decisions about medication, schooling, the fact that we can't often have a break. I think we are often afraid we are somehow going to cause irreversible damage by getting angry with them, or making the wrong choices, etc...

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: First and foremost, remember that your child's ADHD is NOT your "fault". There is a lot of research evidence now showing that the structure and function of the brains of individuals with ADHD differ from those without ADHD. It is not caused by bad parenting.

As the parent of a child with ADHD, you often have difficult choices to make about your child's treatment. Be an educated consumer and seek out treatments that have research support. For children with ADHD, that means stimulant medication and behavior therapy at home and at school. The combination of meds and behavior therapy work best for most children with ADHD.

By getting the best treatments for your child as early as possible, you will be helping your child to have the best possible outcomes.

Keep in mind that not everyone will agree with your choices. Everyone has an opinion when it comes to your child's treatment or your parenting. If you seek evidence-based treatment approaches, you can feel confident in your choices.

Moderator 1: Before our next question... For many people, the start of a new year is a time to set new goals and plans for the months ahead, including how we will use our limited resources in these challenging economic times. As a non-profit organization, CHADD relies on membership dues and donations from individuals to support most of its work in serving the needs of people with ADHD. Whether you are a member of CHADD or not, please consider CHADD in your 2010 financial giving plans. For more information or to donate online, see www.chadd.org/Donate for more information and to donate online.

Momoffour: My ADHD son is quite emotional and most expressive when he has to do work he doesn't want to do, especially chores. It is even worse when he has to stop an activity he is already doing. This is bringing grief to the whole family and our other children don't understand his struggle with stopping what he is interested in to do what the family is doing and it frustrates them too. We tend to end up

having to spend sooooo much time working through the challenge that we lose family time and the joy of simple things like dinner time together. Any suggestions on how to help him better move from activity to activity without such disruption to the family?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: When a child protests, often times what happens is that they successfully avoid doing whatever it is s/he did not want to do. It sounds like, in your case, the whole family is missing out on fun times when this happens.

What may be helpful is to try to go on with the fun family activities. You might ignore your child with ADHD's protests and have your meal with the rest of the family. He may decide to join in the fun rather than remaining angry.

Don't be surprised if your child's protests become louder as you ignore him/her. But once he realizes that you are not paying attention to it, he will eventually stop. You may simply say "If you do not clean up your toys, you will lose TV time after dinner" and then withdraw your attention.

Attention and avoidance motivates a lot of these types of behavior. It may be helpful to work with a behavior therapist when working on "planned ignoring" as I described here.

gator: why is it that my daughter can be sooo good for others but it is me that she tests the most?? She has just been diagnosed and many of my friends and family members think I am crazy for seeking out treatment for our family because they never see how she is behind closed doors, and it makes me question myself.

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Often times, friends and family members do not see your child in the contexts or situations that taxes her ADHD (for example, school, homework, or bedtime). You can try to explain this to them and hope that they understand. It may be helpful to attend CHADD meetings, since many parents of children with ADHD deal with this same issue. It can help to talk with others who have had the same difficulties with family and friends not understanding.

ADHDx2: I find myself becoming very discouraged and frustrated with my child's school. I feel like most of the time my son spends there is wasted time. We don't have other options such as homeschooling or private school. Short of making a big stink through legal processes, how can I deal with the hopelessness I'm feeling?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Most schools have a school psychologist or social worker that you can talk with about your concerns. If your child's ADHD is interfering with his or her academic or social functioning, s/he may be eligible for services.

Even without special education services, teachers can use the behavioral techniques we have talked about today in the classroom. Things like a keeping consistent schedule, making expectations clear, and following through with consequences.

A daily report card or school-home note can also be very helpful. On a daily report card, you and your child's teacher decide upon a few goals for your child which will be evaluated each day. Your child can receive rewards or privileges based on his or her success on the daily report card.

Moderator 1: Thanks to everyone for all your questions! While we try to post as many specific questions as possible, we also try to post questions about different issues. We appreciate your patience and will continue trying to get through as many questions as possible in our time remaining

Worddoctor: Our 15-year-old son has severe ADHD which can't be medicated because it exacerbates his Tourette syndrome. There are often (almost always) times when I feel he won't do anything at all unless I directly manage it. At this point we have more than a dozen specialists, counselors and experts involved in his care (psychiatrist, psychologist, neurologist, school staff and on and on) all trying to help him, but he either can't or doesn't want to take their help. I feel if one more expert tells ME what I have to do or change in order to make things easier for HIM, I may snap. How do I handle these feelings? And how do I get him to take more responsibility for his own functioning?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: It sounds like you are certainly doing a lot for your son! I know that staying on top of all of this can be very tiring. As parents, you are the most influential people in your children's lives. You have a very important role. You are the manager of all of his/her health providers and also have the task of structuring the home in a manner that helps your child be most successful.

Doing all of this on a consistent basis is exhausting, isn't it?! That is exactly why we emphasize you taking time out for yourself on a regular basis. If you don't, you will burn out and not be able to do as good of a job as you'd like to do.

You may need to delegate a bit and let others help you so that you can get a break once in awhile. Everyone needs that. Earlier on in the chat, we talked about ways to help your adolescent with ADHD take more responsibility. Start by teaching him/her skills rather than doing things for him/her. This will eventually increase his/her independence and teach him/her ways to cope with his/her symptoms.

Still, your adolescent with ADHD will need you to be more hands-on than the typical adolescent may need.

Moderator 1: We have just about five minutes left. Dr. Chronis-Tuscano will move through as many questions as possible. If we are unable to get to your question please contact one of our Health Information Specialists on ADHD by calling 1-800-233-4050 between 9 AM- 5PM EST or by clicking on the "Ask a Question" link on the top of our website: www.help4adhd.org

Gigi: Our daughter is an expert negotiator and also has a very difficult time taking no for an answer. This constant negotiating wears me down. This seems to overall effect our communication and it is difficult to even have a simple conversation with her without her wanting to negotiate that what I have to say is wrong. Any suggestions?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: Sometimes, as a parent, you can let your child know that an issue is non-negotiable. Think along the lines of the "planned ignoring" we discussed before. By negotiating, your daughter may be delaying something she does not want to do. She is also holding your full attention, which is very rewarding for kids.

Try saying "I understand that you do not want to XXX right now, but that is non-negotiable". Praise her if she does what is asked, and ignore her continued efforts to discuss the issue. She may become more upset before she finally gives up. If you re-join the negotiations, she will learn that she should stick with it because she may eventually get her way.

I know it is difficult, but there are times when "no" means "no"!

Dlbsjb: If you could recommend just one book or piece of advice that could help us parent these ADHD children what would it be? It seems that I need to reference something tangible to help me stay focused as a parent.

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: I really like "Parenting the Strong Willed Child" by Forehand & Long. It is easy to understand and particularly helpful for parents of your children. It is not specific to ADHD but more general advice on parenting. I also like [Russell] Barkley's books on ADHD.

Sorry, I meant to say "young children".

Jenniferk: How do you juggle the need for individual time to de-stress and also to have time to de-stress as a couple?

Andrea Chronis-Tuscano: In today's world, we are all pulled in a million directions. It is hard enough to find time for oneself not to mention time as a couple.

I think the key is to plan ahead. Work out a schedule. Be planful in terms of scheduling to make it more likely that you will be able to follow through with your plan to do something for yourself or with your spouse. Some couples we work with may take a half day off work to see a matinee or go out after their children go to sleep (with a babysitter at home, of course).

They may exercise in the morning before their children wake up. Be creative. Parents can also take turns so that one parent can do something for him/herself while the other is with the kids, and vice-versa.

You have to be committed to making it happen, and be creative and planful in figuring out the best way to schedule things.

That may be all we have time for today. Thank you for your attention. I hope some of the strategies we talked about today will be helpful to you. The key is to take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child with ADHD!

Moderator 1: Thank you Dr. Chronis-Tuscano! Thank you for all your answers, which have provided practical advice for all who care for or parent a child with ADHD. At the NRC, we respond to thousands

of parents each year who are concerned about their child's well-being. In addition to helping all who have participated in today's chat, our NRC staff have also learned how important it is for us to encourage parents to take time for their own health as an important step to taking care of their children.

Moderator 1: If you have a question that was not answered today, please contact us online (National Resource Center's Web site at <http://www.help4adhd.org>) or by phone (800-233-4050) between 9AM and 5PM EST and one of our health information specialists will respond.

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