



SEEK
Safe Environment for Every Kid

The SEEK Newsletter

Spring 2022

Helping Parents Cope with Stress

SEEK's Mission

- Strengthen families
- Support parents and parenting
- Promote child health, development, safety
- Prevent maltreatment

Stress is a normal part of life. Stress can be acute (e.g., moving one's home) or chronic (e.g., being in a violent relationship, living in poverty). Responses to stress vary. An upcoming test may evoke a positive stress response, motivating one to prepare well. More severe and ongoing circumstances may lead to a tolerable stress response, such as parenting a child with a disability, buffered by supportive relationships. A toxic stress response may result from severe and repeated adversities, without adequate support. While parents may need help with all kinds of stress, the SEEK model prioritizes situations of "extreme stress."

The SEEK Parent Questionnaire-R (PQ-R) is an evidence-based tool to identify extreme stress and other important social determinants of health. Screening is important because the problem may be well masked and not outwardly apparent. "Do you often feel under extreme stress?" helps identify parents and caregivers facing this problem. A brief assessment clarifies the nature and source of their stress, enabling an initial intervention. Stress may manifest in many ways including:

Emotional
Anxiety
Anger
Agitation
Sadness
Mood swings

Physical
Headaches
Neck stiffness
Gastrointestinal symptoms
Heart palpitations
Tense muscles

Behavioral
Over-reacting
Acting impulsively
Using alcohol or drugs
Difficulty sleeping
Withdrawing from relationships
Difficulty concentrating

A parent may mention their stress, a primary care professional (PCP) may notice a parent to be overwhelmed or anxious or parents may screen positive. PCPs can help such parents facing extreme stress in several ways using SEEK's REAP approach - Reflect, Empathize, Assess, Plan.

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It begins with **Reflecting** back what the parent has disclosed (“I see you’re feeling extremely stressed”) or what the PCP observed. Explicitly expressing **Empathy** helps foster rapport and trust (“Being a parent can be stressful!”). Next, there’s a need to briefly **Assess** the nature of the problem (“What’s contributing to your stress? What have you tried to reduce your stress? How is this working? What else could you try?”) The assessment provides the basis for developing, with the parent, the **Plan**. See the [SEEK Algorithm and Responses to Barriers](#) regarding stress on SEEK’s website.

Planning with the parent involves Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI helps gauge a parent’s readiness to address a problem. Importantly, MI invites the parent to take the lead in developing the plan by eliciting their thoughts about the problem, and what could be tried. Good rapport and the REAP approach using MI involves parents in a way that helps them “own” the plan, making it more likely they will implement it. PCPs can also offer the [SEEK Parent Handout](#) or an alternative, with key messages about stress and ways to reduce it. The Handout should be customized with information on local resources. Even if parents are not ready to address their problem, subsequent visits offer opportunities to do so. A seed for change has been planted and the parent may later turn to the PCP for help. Guidance for helping parents manage stress includes:

- Convey interest in helping and hope that together you can improve the situation
- Avoid the stressor if possible
- Be aware of your stress and how it may be affecting you. Be careful not to take it out on your child
- Remember to focus on what you can control - there are things in life we **can** change
- Figure out what helps reduce your stress - going for a walk, exercise, talking to a partner
- Make time for yourself and things you enjoy
- Seek support from family and friends
- Practice deep breathing exercises
- Get enough sleep
- Meditate
- Deepen your spirituality
- Seek help from a mental health professional

Parenting itself is often stressful. Below is general guidance:

- Don’t lose your cool when your child’s behavior is upsetting, challenging
- Take a ‘time out’ to cool down
- Try figure out why your child is behaving this way and respond constructively. Preventing triggering situations is best - e.g., taking your child to the supermarket late in the day triggers tantrums; try avoiding doing so
- Ask family or friends for help when you need a break
- Make time for your child every day, even 15 minutes around a daily routine like bath time, mealtime or bedtime will be special and build a healthy relationship

In addition to the SEEK Algorithms and Responses to Barriers and the SEEK Parent Handouts, the [SEEK online training videos](#) help PCPs respond to problems such as extreme stress. These resources are helpful guides. Helping stressed parents cope with difficult circumstances benefits the entire family.

References

What Happens to Your Body During the Fight or Flight Response? Cleveland Clinic. <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-happens-to-your-body-during-the-fight-or-flight-response/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20fight%20or%20flight%20response,perceived%20as%20a%20dangerous%20situation.%E2%80%9D>. Published December 9, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2022.

Chronic stress. Yale Medicine. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/conditions/stress-disorder>. Published November 15, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2022.

Healthy ways to handle life's stressors. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/tips>. Published November 1, 2019. Accessed April 13, 2022.

Williams et al. Engaging families through motivational interviewing. *Pediatr Clin North Am*. 2014;61(5):907-921.

Toxic Stress. Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress>. Accessed May 25, 2022.

SEEK Parent Pamphlet

We created a simple parent pamphlet about SEEK. This can be given to parents before they've completed the Parent Questionnaire-R (PQ-R). The pamphlet briefly describes SEEK, the PQ-R, what happens after a parent completes the PQ-R, and there's a QR code leading to the SEEK parent video. Now available in Spanish too. Click here for the pamphlet in [Spanish](#) or [English](#).

Dr. Susan Kressly Webinar on Coding for Maximum Value and SEEK

On May 10th, Dr. Susan Kressly presented a webinar on Coding for Maximum Value Care. She presented valuable info on coding regarding social determinants of health. The link and passcode for this webinar are below.

<https://umaryland.zoom.us/rec/share/VuBC9RGzgAczoM088VX19cST4SV5MERWugf3cvYSyR0N-gwuehpjx5Hj3i28tdPo.8e-oglrULDSk4jIW?startTime=1652200359000> Passcode: V0VzEU=3

Unite Us

Unite Us is an organization that may benefit your practice. They offer services to address social needs of patients and families by facilitating referrals to an array of community resources. Unite Us has different levels of services; some are free. [Click here](#) to see if Unite Us is in your state, and [Click here](#) to learn more about their services.

SEEK in Sweden

In Sweden, SEEK is being studied through a cluster-randomized controlled trial in which 20 000 families participated in a two-year intervention between 2018-2020. This longitudinal study will follow the health and wellbeing of the children and their parents through 2029. The SEEK model has now been fully implemented in five of Sweden's 21 counties, and preparations are underway to initiate pilot projects in five more counties during 2022-2023. Steven Lucas, MD, PhD at Uppsala University is leading this work.

SEEK Mini Manual

We've created a [SEEK Mini Manual](#) that covers the background of SEEK, core components of the model, and practical info on implementing it.

SEEK Quarterly Newsletters on the SEEK website

If you'd like to read previous SEEK Quarterly Newsletters, please visit the [SEEK website](#). Topics include: the importance of strengths and protective factors in helping families, helpful hints to improve your referral process and the importance of Motivational Interviewing.

SEEK is on Twitter!

Please follow us for updates and useful info. Also, help others learn about SEEK by retweeting us. Follow SEEK on Twitter at: [@SafeEnv4EvryKid](#)

Questions or Concerns?

The SEEK team is always available to help. Please don't hesitate to contact us! Email Rose Belanger (rbelanger@som.umaryland.edu) or Stacey Newton (snewton@som.umaryland.edu).

Consider Donating to the SEEK Project

To continue the important work of promoting children's health, development, wellbeing and safety, please consider helping disseminate the SEEK model. Visit this [link](#) to donate to the SEEK Project.

Please share this Newsletter with anyone who may be interested. Let us know if we should add them to our Friends of SEEK list to receive this, and only this. Also, let us know if you do not wish to receive this Newsletter. Email Stacey Newton (snewton@som.umaryland.edu). And we welcome feedback and suggestions regarding our Newsletter.