Tips for time-stressed families

Families today are definitely time-stressed. It seems like there are never enough hours in the day and you keep getting asked to do more with less. First and foremost, remember to keep your life in perspective and try to live in and enjoy the moment. If you are too busy worrying about rushing to your next activity or appointment, you'll miss out on "the now."



Develop a family calendar. Using a family calendar to keep track of activities and chores can keep everyone in the family on track and help prevent missed appointments, surprises or oversights. Encourage all family members, including young children, to get in the habit of noting important events, activities or deadlines on the calendar. Use a large erasable white board or a large paper calendar that offers enough space to write activities and events clearly. The calendar can be used to note:

- Projects
- Appointments
- Holidays
- Birthdays and anniversaries
- Community meetings
- Athletic events (e.g., hockey, softball practice, dance class)
- Social events
- Work commitments

Before discarding or erasing the calendar each month, determine what can be eliminated or what is taking more time than originally planned.

Establish routines. Although your family is already following a type of routine out of necessity, it might be time to consider establishing a slightly more structured set of routines to follow. Routines can help us schedule and complete all of the many tasks involved in our day-to-day lives. They can provide a sense of order and predictability, and can also help forge stronger family bonds. Here are a few examples of family routines:

- **Preparing for mornings.** Make mornings more enjoyable by getting into the habit of preparing the night before for the morning rush. For example, after dinner, prepare lunches and set the breakfast table. Encourage children to prepare their backpacks and bathe the night before. Select your own and your children's clothes before going to bed.

- **Dinner routines.** Hopefully, dinner is a time when all or most of the family gets together. Make it a real "family affair" by getting older children involved in meal preparation (and planning) and having younger children set and clear the table. Turn off the radio or TV, and put aside the newspaper so that you can all enjoy each other's company. Establish some dinnertime family traditions around story telling or sharing of the day's funniest moments.

- **Routines for children.** Children thrive with a certain amount of structure. By helping children develop their own routines, you can also help them build self-esteem, self-discipline and independence. Encourage them to develop a bedtime routine that includes self-care (brushing teeth, bathing, etc.), preparation for the next day and bedtime reading. Establish a set of weekly chores or errands (taking out garbage, cutting grass, raking leaves, sorting laundry, etc.) for which they are responsible.

Plan ahead. You can put more hours into your day and commit to more family time if you plan ahead. Here are some suggestions as to how:

- **Make a weekly meal plan and freeze meals ahead of time.** Make double portions of the family's favourite dishes. Make and freeze sandwiches and other lunches and take them out at breakfast time so they will thaw by lunch.

- **Buy birthday, anniversary and special events cards and gifts in advance**, to prevent last-minute gift hunting and wrapping.

- **Have backup plans for after school or daycare.** Keep phone numbers of your children's school friends at work so you can call if you need backup for pick up at school or daycare in the event of an emergency.

- **Find and use support systems**—car pool with neighbours or other parents; create a schedule of reciprocal pick up at the day care or at sports activities and parties as well as reciprocal babysitting.

Simplify your life. To give yourself peace of mind, here are some ways to simplify complex tasks:

- **Consolidate bill paying.** Stash bills in one place when they arrive. Pick a time each month to sort and pay bills that are due.

- **Set realistic standards for housework.** Learn to delegate tasks and chores to your partner and children. Save time by combining chores with regular routines—for example, after showering, always wipe the shower stall/tiles and mop up around the sink each night at bedtime. Create one central spot for laundry and ask each family member to put his or her dirty laundry in that designated spot.

- **Keep meals simple—especially during busy times.** Nutritious meals don't have to be complicated or gourmet. On busy nights, soup, sandwich and fruit can suffice. Get children involved in selecting lunch foods and in preparing their lunches.

- **Choose easy-care clothing for yourself and your family.** This will cut down on trips to the dry cleaners as well as laundry and ironing.

- **Limit your activities.** Review the number of after-school, evening or weekend activities that your family participates in and determine whether these can be reduced in favour of rest or at-home time.

Use outside services. If feasible, use outside services and/or hire a high school student to help you with basic household chores. This will free up some of your time, which you will now be able to devote to more meaningful tasks. Consider hiring help for:

- House cleaning
- Grass cutting and gardening
- Snow shovelling
- Car washing and maintenance
- Pet care

If you consider your family to be one that’s often pressed for time, consider the advice in this article to help you make the most of your days. By planning ahead and simplifying your life, you’ll be able to focus on more important life experiences and spend extra time with your family.