

research in brief

Crisis in the Family

McCubbin and his associates' review of families coping with stress focuses on three areas: (1) the events, both expected and unexpected, that cause stress; (2) the resources within the family for dealing with the event; and (3) the social support systems that affect the family's behavior. An extensive variety of research findings over the past 10 years is included.

Stress or crisis is defined as not the event itself, but the family's perception of it. Some events occur over the life cycle and can be anticipated by most families, such as the arrival of children and all the phases till they reach adulthood and establish their own homes, the "empty nest" (which has less impact than some have conjectured), retirement (a major impact for older people), widowhood with its accompanying grief and loneliness, and the aging process (for example, special housing concerns). These are less stressful than the unexpected crisis, or those situations arising only for some families: divorce, losing a job, the changing roles of women, dual incomes, all of which are more apt to happen in the younger phase of the life cycle.

The ability of the family to cope adequately with a stressful situation depends on family members' perception of the event. Adaptable, cohesive families that have strong personal resources, including financial strengths, problem-solving skills, physical health, and psychological well-being, can more readily adapt than those that are deficient.

Although social support has been defined in a variety of ways, an essential part of all definitions includes those systems outside the family whether a community agency, a network of friends, or mutual self-help groups. As would be expected, the broader the social support base the more effectively a family can deal with stress.

Because Extension programs in helping normal families handle stress are rapidly increasing, a well-written review of the research during the past decade is beneficial. This summary can help Extension professionals focus on their particular area of interest and concern.

"Family Stress and Coping: A Decade Review." Hamilton I. McCubbin and others. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XLII (November, 1980), 855-71.

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