

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Your Feelings : Keeping Calm

It is hard to keep calm at times, but it is important to try. If you lower your overall stress levels, you will find it easier to stay calm and not over-react to situations. You can learn to recognise and try to avoid situations that make you lose control. You can learn strategies to stay calm in the moment.

### Keeping Calm

#### Strong emotions

Your child's problems could be stirring up very strong emotions for you. You might be feeling fear, frustration, or anger. Feelings are healthy. They send an important message to you, and you need to feel and respect them.

Strong emotions, however, can lead us to act in unhelpful ways. At these times your reactions may be extreme or uncontrolled. While the situation continues to be bad, the emotions that go with it will also continue. But you control how you act on your emotions.

It is helpful if you can try to recognise when you are in the grip of a strong emotion, and learn how to control your reactions.

#### Why do we react the way we do?

Often our response to a situation is automatic or unconscious. It may be from our genetic make-up, or influenced by early life experiences. Usually our survival responses serve us very well. However there are times when our feelings and responses are not accurate or helpful.

It can help to learn about why we react the way we do, and to be aware of our thought patterns. There are times when it is helpful to re-program our thoughts and reactions.

#### Over-reacting

You may notice that you get very angry or distressed even when something small happens. It may be that your nerves are on edge and it does not take a lot for strong emotions to rise.

You may be operating with a constantly high level of stress, so that a small thing can easily tip the balance. You may be reacting to all the things that have built up over time, rather than just the thing that is happening now.

#### Reduce your general stress level

Hormones are released when we are fearful or stressed, which make our mind more alert and give us energy to respond quickly to danger. If these hormones are released often, they can affect how we cope. Blood pressure goes up. Levels of mental and physical tension may not easily go down again, and we stay in that over-aroused state. Energy reserves get used up, and we may experience fatigue or illness.

We need to be able to bring ourselves back to a calmer state when the immediate threat is gone. When you have a child you are constantly worried about, it can be hard to have a break from stress. But it is very important to have a break for your own health and your ability to cope.

It is good to create times of relative calm in your everyday life to bring your overall stress levels down. Exercise and moments of enjoyment and tranquility give your body a chance to release tension and calm down.

If you are calmer to start with, there is a greater chance that you will be able to respond to a situation in a helpful way, and that your response will be at an appropriate level.

#### Stop situations arising

If you reflect on the occasions when you get very upset or angry you may be able to see patterns. You might be able to work out ways to avoid getting into those situations.

#### Red buttons

Some things can become like 'red buttons' in your life; situations, moments or things said that can be relied on to make you or another family member lose their cool.

Thinking back over things that have been happening in the family recently, you may become aware of 'red buttons' in yourself and other family members. Their red buttons might be things like: criticism, telling them what to do, asking them about drug use, invading their privacy. Your red buttons might be: seeing your young person drug affected; feeling they do not care about you any more; feeling they will not listen to you; fear of rejection.

Work out what you plan to do when one of your red buttons is pushed. Knowing what they are can sometimes be enough to stop you reacting to them. You are responsible for handling your own feelings, and for putting in place boundaries in your relationships when you need to. You may also be able to sometimes avoid the situations that push the red buttons of others in the family.

### **Take a step back**

It may be that one of the reasons you are so overwrought is that you are too emotionally involved in your child's situation. This is frustrating and demoralising because you cannot control what is happening.

It is better for you to try to take a step back emotionally and remember that this is your child's life, not yours. You can care, but you cannot take over. In fact, at this stage of their development, they need to become more independent of you.

You also need to realise that your child's problems could take a long time to resolve. You cannot afford to wait for them to get better so you can feel better; you need to look for ways to feel better and more in control regardless of their situation.

### **How can I keep calm in the moment?**

You can learn to recognise when your tension level is rising and you are in danger of losing control. You can develop strategies to intervene before you get to boiling point.

Think about times when you have lost control. Remember what it feels like, and what it felt like at points along the way. Try to remember that feeling so you can recognise it when it starts next time. Try to notice when your heart starts racing or you start to become upset.

When you feel your tension rising, quietly let your child know you are starting to feel angry and you do not want to lose control. Tell them if you think you cannot deal with the situation right now.

Pay attention to your breathing. When you calm your breathing and relax your muscles, you send messages to your brain that there is no threat. Even when you do this artificially, by consciously slowing and deepening your breathing, it works to calm you down. Relax your body. Go through each part of your body; touch it; tense it up; then let the tension go.

If you are going to try to continue the conversation, pause for a moment before speaking and try to think through what you really want to say, and what you are trying to achieve. It might help to try to imagine that you are speaking to someone else that you respect, so that you are able to maintain a respectful and reasonable tone.

If you do not think you can stay calm, walk away from the situation. Go into a different room, or outside. Go for a walk around the block. Come back to talk through the problem later, when you have calmed down.

If you often have difficulties managing anger then you should seek assistance. Your local community health centre should be able to help with referrals to an anger management course or to a counsellor who specialises in helping people with this problem. It is a common problem and it is possible to develop strategies to manage your anger more appropriately. This will have positive benefits for both you and your family as you begin to feel more in control of your emotional life.

### Time apart

If your relationship with your child is very strained and explosive, your needs and your young person's needs may be too incompatible at this time. It may be appropriate to physically separate for a while. Is there someone else your child can stay with who is a reliable and trustworthy adult that cares for your child too – perhaps a member of your extended family or a good friend? Or can you take a break for a few hours or, if necessary, a few days, whilst another trusted family member cares for your children at your home?

If separation needs to occur, it is best not to suggest it in the heat of the moment. Talk about it when you are calm, with explanation and warning so other arrangements can be made. Reassure your child of your commitment to the relationship in the long-term, and suggest a time in the near future to try to talk things through again.

Time apart can help to re-establish boundaries in the relationship. You may come back together in a new way, with more respectful behaviour.



### Tips from this Help Sheet

- Strong emotions can lead us to act in unhelpful ways
- It can help to learn why we react the way we do, and re-program our thoughts and reactions at times.
- Some things are 'red buttons' in you or your family's life – identify them and work out a plan to deal with them
- Take a step back – it is your child's life. You can care, but you can't take over. Look after yourself
- Pay attention to your breathing when stressed. Take deep breaths and relax your muscles.
- If you do not think that you can stay calm, walk away for a while.



### Related Help Sheets

- Improving Communication
- Need A Helping Hand?
- Setting Boundaries
- Dealing with Conflict
- Improving your Relationship





→ **Strong Bonds**  
Jesuit Social Services  
PO Box 1141  
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700  
Email [info@strongbonds.jss.org.au](mailto:info@strongbonds.jss.org.au)  
Web [www.strongbonds.jss.org.au](http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au)

→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

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