



How to Build Resilience, Lower Stress, and Improve Mental Health

A resource guide to help children and families living with heart conditions.

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Resilience is a skill that can help you manage life's challenges. Resilience can improve your mental and emotional wellness. This guide explains how to build resilience to help children and families living with heart conditions.

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What is resilience?

Resilience is a skill of inner strength. Like many skills, it can be learned and built up over time. Resilience gives you the ability to:

- Not give up and keep going after a difficult experience.
- Be adaptable when you face a challenge.
- Manage tough situations in a more accepting and peaceful way.
- Respond to problems more calmly, even when you are angry or upset.

Benefits of resilience

Resilience is important for your emotional wellbeing. It helps you get through tough times and express how you feel. Each time you handle a difficult situation in a calmer way, you learn and grow. Resilience makes you feel more confident and ready for the next challenge.

Resilience helps you navigate life more smoothly. It can help you manage stress and feel better about yourself. It enables you to face the future with more confidence. Building resilience is especially important if you or your loved ones are facing health problems.

4 steps to begin building resilience

Building resilience takes time and practice. Here are some things you can do, alone or with your child, to build more resilience:

1. **Take small steps:** Break down problems into small, more manageable pieces.
2. **Ask for help:** Ask family, friends, and your child's care team for support when you need it.
3. **Stay in the present moment:** Focus on what you can do today, right now, or in the next **5 minutes**.
4. **Practice self-care:** It can be challenging to take care of yourself when you are caring for a sick child. But your physical and emotional health are important because they help you be there for your child in the ways that you want to be. Even small amounts of self-care can help you feel renewed.

Examples of self-care:

- Drinking water.
- Eating healthy food.
- Adding physical movement to your day.
- Sleeping or resting when your child is sleeping.
- Doing an activity that you enjoy.
- Adding small things to a routine, like a face mask to a shower, or listening to a podcast while taking a brief walk outside.






Learning from tough experiences

Building resilience helps you accept yourself and what's going on around you without judging it. When you begin to recognize and accept some things as they are right now, even if you don't like them, it helps build resilience. This doesn't mean you have to agree with everything or give up. It just means you learn to observe how things are before trying to change them or make them different.

Learning from tough experiences (continued)

Your child's heart problem

Learning more about your child's heart condition can help you feel more in control. Scan the QR codes below for more information about heart conditions in children.

Organization names	Website	QR code
CHD Care Compass	www.chdcarecompass.com	
Children's Cardiomyopathy Foundation	www.childrenscardiomyopathy.org	
Mended Hearts	www.mendedhearts.org/learn/	

Ongoing stress

It is common to feel stressed after a medical event. Not all stress is bad. For example, thinking about what happened can help you understand and process the experience. But if stress goes on for a long time and makes everyday life feel hard to manage, you may need more support.

If you notice that everyday life is hard for you or your child, please talk to the care team. We are here to help you understand what is happening and find the support you and your child need.

Traumatic stress reactions

Sometimes pain, serious illness, and surgery can cause your body and mind to react strongly. Intense feelings, behaviors, and responses that happen after a scary experience are called **traumatic stress reactions**. They can include:

- Acting differently than usual.
- Having trouble taking medicine or going to see a doctor.
- Unable to stop thinking about what happened.
- Feeling very sad, worried, or scared.
- Having trouble sleeping.



If you have these reactions a lot of the time, they can turn into a condition called **post-traumatic stress disorder**, or **PTSD**. This is when the feelings and reactions keep going even after the scary event is over. If this is true for you or your child, please talk to the care team for support.

Managing stress

On your child's healthcare journey, there can be many challenges. Learning ways to manage stress can help when you are in a difficult situation. The useful practices listed below can also be shared with your child and family. These are proven ways to help manage stress.

Managing stress (continued)

Practicing mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness means being focused on the present moment, rather than the past or what might happen in the future. The best way to bring your focus to the present moment is to be aware of your breathing. Below are some easy ways to practice mindfulness. Find the way that works best for you.

Belly breathing

This is a simple way to relax and feel better. You can do it sitting or lying down. Belly breathing at bedtime can be a great way to connect with your child and help them get calm before falling asleep. Get comfortable and follow these steps:

1. Place your hands on your belly.
2. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose.
3. Feel your belly rise under your hands.
4. Let your breath out slowly through your mouth.
5. Feel your belly sink under your hands.
6. Repeat this for a few minutes, or for as long as it feels good.



Finding something to be thankful for every day

Writing down things you're thankful for can help you feel better. Doing this every day can improve your outlook on life:

1. At the end of each day, think about 1, 2, or 3 things that made you feel thankful. They can be big or small.
2. Write these things in a journal, in a notepad, or on your phone.



Even on difficult days, try to find something to be thankful for, no matter how small it is. An example might be seeing a pretty flower, hearing your favorite song, or seeing someone smile. This exercise is also called writing in a **gratitude journal**. You can also practice this with your child and family.

Practicing gratitude as a family

Practicing gratitude can shift thoughts away from stress and worry. Choose a time when everyone in the family can take a turn saying what they are thankful for. Mealtime or bedtime can be a good time to do this. Talking about things you are thankful for, or sharing your favorite part of the day, can be a positive and meaningful addition to your family's daily routine.

Moving your body with stretching or yoga

Yoga is a way to keep our bodies and minds healthy. It includes moving our bodies in different ways, taking deep breaths, and relaxing our minds as we move. Many people report that doing yoga helps them feel better physically and emotionally.



Managing stress (continued)

Walking meditation

This is a practice to get in touch with how your body experiences the things around you. This can be a great way to relax your mind for a while. When finished, some people find it helpful to write about the experience in a journal, in a notepad, or on their phone.



- 1. Pick a foot and start walking carefully.**
Feel the ground under your feet. Watch how high you lift up your foot and how fast you walk. Then slow down a little and focus on each step.
- 2. Notice how walking makes you feel.**
You might feel that one leg is stronger than the other. That's okay! It's a common thing to notice when you're paying attention to your steps.
- 3. Feel what's around you.**
If you're outside, notice what the air feels like. Is it warm or cold? How does your skin feel? When you breathe, feel the air moving in and out of your nose and mouth.
- 4. Watch how your thoughts change while you walk.**
If your mind starts thinking about other things, gently bring your attention back to your body. Feel the ground, smell the air, see what's around you.
- 5. Use your senses to experience everything.**
Stop for a moment to notice how your body feels. Be curious about what you see, hear, and feel.
- 6. Keep walking at a pace that feels good for you.**
Remember to pay attention to your feet and stay in the moment.
- 7. When you finish, think about how you feel.**
Notice your mood. Take a few slow, deep breaths. How does it feel to be in your body? Be kind and gentle to yourself.

Grounding exercises

Grounding exercises can help you feel calm and stay in the moment. If you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, these exercises can make you feel more balanced and centered inside.

Some ways to ground yourself are paying attention to your senses, moving your body, or saying short, positive phrases to yourself, also called **affirmations**.

Soft gazing

Soft gazing means looking gently at something around you without focusing too hard. This helps your mind relax and brings your attention to what is happening right now. When you soften your gaze, you can feel less stress and calmer. Do this for even **1 minute**. It's an easy way to connect with what's around you and make you feel more grounded and centered.

Managing stress (continued)

3-2-1 grounding

Start by closing your eyes if that is comfortable for you. If not, softly gaze at the tip of your nose. Place your hands on your chest and belly. Take a few long, slow breaths in through your nose. Feel your chest and belly rise under your hands. Breathe out slowly through your mouth and feel your chest and belly sink in.

After some long, slow breaths, gently open your eyes, then:

1. **Look** around and name **3 things** you can see.
2. **Feel** around and name **2 things** you can touch.
3. **Listen** carefully and name **1 thing** you can hear.

Talking about feelings in a calm way

Many children born with heart problems feel a lot of different emotions. They may feel stressed, sad, worried, or afraid. These feelings are normal but can be very intense. Listening, talking, and sharing can make your child's big emotions feel less scary. Encourage your child to name their different feelings and talk about them. This will help your child build self-awareness and resilience.

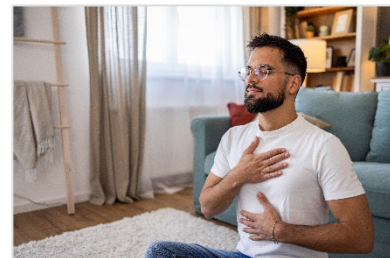
We also want you to share your feelings. We are here to listen and to help find you the extra support you and your family need to feel good - physically and emotionally.

Finding the right therapist

We care about your emotional wellbeing and want to support your entire family. Children, teenagers, and young adults with a heart condition, and their families, can benefit from seeing a mental health specialist, also called a **therapist** or **psychologist**. They can help you understand feelings and manage stress. If you have questions or worries about your child's mental health or your own, please talk to the care team. We are here to listen and can help you find the resources you need on this journey.

The heart center now offers holistic care services through the Thrive Program. Holistic care focuses on the body, mind, and feelings because each one affects the other. The Thrive Program therapists and psychologists can help children, teenagers, and the whole family with many things, including:

- Coping with health problems and complex diagnoses.
- Anxiety or stress, related to surgery and other medical treatments.
- Fearful thoughts related to medical trauma.



Finding the right therapist (continued)

Ask your care team for a referral to the **Thrive Program**, or scan the QR code or visit the website below:



Thrive Program, social and emotional support for the whole family.
thrive.stanfordchildrens.org

You may also find support through an organization called **Ollie's Branch**. They can provide up to **8 therapy sessions per family member** with a licensed mental health professional. Ollie's Branch welcomes heart warriors at any stage of life. To learn more about Ollie's Branch, scan the QR code or visit the website below.



Ollie's Branch, extending peace of mind.
<https://theohhf.org/ollies-branch/>

Connecting with other families

Many families find it helpful to meet and talk with others who have experienced the same things. These resources can help you find people who understand what you're going through. Together you can talk about and learn from your shared experiences.

To connect with other families of children born with heart problems, you can scan the QR codes or visit the websites below:



Camp Taylor offers a family camp for kids and teens with heart problems, **ages 9 to 14**.
www.kidsheartcamp.org



Mended Little Hearts, an online support community providing education, hope, and support to families of children born with heart problems.
<https://mendedhearts.org/about-us/about-mended-little-hearts/>









MyHeart Teen Community, a Facebook™ group for young people, **ages 13 to 25**, with congenital heart disease or acquired heart conditions.
www.facebook.com/groups/myheartheartkids




Young Mended Hearts, a Facebook™ peer support group for adults, **ages 18 to 55**, who have heart disease, including congenital heart disease.
www.facebook.com/YoungMendedHeartsInternational

Recommended books and apps

Title	Description	QR code
Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book by Elin Snel. • Available in English and Spanish. • Fun exercises for you and your child. • For ages 5 to 12 years. • https://www.shambhala.com/sitting-still-like-a-frog-2968.html 	
What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book by Dawn Huebner. • Available in English and Spanish. • For ages 7 to 11 years. • https://www.dawnhuebnerphd.com/worry-too-much-overcoming-anxiety/ 	
Breathe, Think, Do With Sesame®	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free app by Sesame Workshop™. • Available in English and Spanish. • Teaches problem-solving. • Teaches self-control. • For ages 4 to 6 years. • https://learningworksforkids.com/apps/breathe-think-do-with-sesame/ 	
Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subscription app. • Free for trial. • Images and guided meditation. • For sleep, relaxation, stress, and anxiety. • Free YouTube videos. • Ages 4 years and older (kids section) • https://www.calm.com/ 	
Headspace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subscription app. • Free for 14-day trial. • Guided meditation and mindfulness. • Coaching available. • Ages 4 years and older, kids section • https://headspace.com// 	
Insight Timer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free app. • Thousands of meditations. • Helps with sleep, anxiety, and stress. • Ages 12 years and older. • https://insighttimer.com/ 	

Recommended books and apps (continued)

Title	Description	QR code
Mindfulness Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free app. • By the Department of Veterans Affairs. • Helps everyone learn and practice mindfulness. • Ages 12 years and older. • https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach 	

More information

Remember, you are not alone on this journey. If you have questions, concerns, or if you think you need help but don't know where to start, please talk to your child's care team. We want to hear what is on your mind and we want to help connect you with the resources and the support you and your child need.

Author: Heart Center Thrive Program

Health Literacy Review: The Office of Patient/Family Education & Health Literacy