

Chilled : together

Meet the Stressed Family Robinson. Everyone's stressed. Dad's stressed because he knows his company is cutting their workforce at the end of the year. So he has to keep proving himself or he might be out of a job. Mum's stressed because she works shifts, and she's trying to do an extra college course to help her get the qualifications for a job with regular hours. Sarah's stressed because she's worried she won't make the grades for university. Martin's stressed because he's not fitting in at school and he struggles with his homework. Clair's stressed because everyone else in the family is stressed. And Simba the cat is stressed because everyone's so stressed they sometimes forget to feed her...

There's so much stress that everyone's found their own way to chill out. Dad plays computer games. Mum watches soap operas. Sarah spends hours on Facebook, Martin likes playing 'Minecraft', Clair plays fantasy games, and Simba visits the old lady next door, who always has time to stroke her, give her a good scratch behind the ears, and open a tin of sardines.

Problem 1 – everyone is feeling stressed. Problem 2 – everyone is chilling out alone and becoming increasingly disconnected and isolated. Eventually this may lead to Problems 3, 4 and 5, like arguments, loneliness and frustration.

Creating the calm

Tom has a challenging job as a company lawyer. He used to drive back during the rush hour, arriving home all irritable and out of sorts. After a hard day's work he felt tired and overwhelmed. Sometimes it was the last straw if the twins were having an argument, or his wife, Alison, needed help in the kitchen, or his older son needed help with his homework. When he was grumpy and angry, everyone else became grumpy and miserable, because they were all tired and stressed.

So Tom tried doing something different. Now he takes the train to work. He has to leave a little earlier and he gets home a little later, but he uses the time on the train to chill out. He listens to soothing music or audio books. Sometimes he does the crossword in the newspaper. The path from the station meanders through a park. If Tom has any worries that are still lingering from his day he leaves them 'hanging' from one of the trees. He knows he can always 'pick' them up tomorrow on the way back to work, if he wants to...

By the time he's putting his key in the front door he's left his work and stresses behind, and he's in a better place to be with his family.

Alison tried making changes too. She finds it works better if she prepares dinner the night before. Sometimes she and Tom spend 15 minutes peeling and chopping together at the end of the day. When the children come in from school they take it in turns to make fruit juices and smoothies to drink, and they all sit down and do something fun and relaxing together before opening their school bags and starting their homework.

Calming down together

Just being around people you love can help you to feel calmer and happier. But it's even better if you can find some creative ways to chill out

together. That way you can enjoy spending time with each other; having fun together; and discovering new ways to de-stress together. Instead of being lost and lonely in your own virtual worlds, you can reconnect in your own real world.

The Chill List

Here are some simple ways to chill out together as a family. Try some that look appealing and see what works best for you. Or take it in turns to choose an idea from the list. Add any fresh 'chills' to the list too. Just plan to do things for 10-15 minutes at first, so that you don't feel stressed that all this chilling out is taking up too much of your time!

- Go for a walk together and look out for beauty wherever you can find it – even a blade of grass or a weed growing on the edge of the pavement, someone smiling, the details in a tree, a neatly-kept front garden, or the pattern of clouds in the sky.
- Be active together. Go for a run, play football in the park, fly a kite, swim, or shoot basketballs.
- Find a CD of calming music and play it as soon as you arrive home.
- Bake bread together. It's a simple, slow process. The kneading gives your hands a massage, the aroma makes everyone feel good, the flavor's amazing, and you'll all have a positive sense of accomplishment.
- Learn how to give each other foot massages or back rubs.
- Roll your feet over golf balls to give them an instant massage.
- Have a tickle fight! Not for too long or it will probably end in tears!
- Have a moment of wonder together. Find a few natural things like large shells, flowers, tree bark, non-poisonous seedpods, interesting stones, different fruits and vegetables, or even your own hand. Invite each person to look carefully at their object for 3 minutes, discover new things they haven't noticed before, and then introduce their amazing objects to each other.
- Sit down together and drink something slow. Maybe hot chocolate, a cup of chamomile tea, a smoothie, or a glass of fresh water. Sipping drinks calms you down because you need to hold your breath when you swallow, and it helps you to breathe more slowly.
- Smell lavender. Take a few deep breaths and inhale the fragrance. Lavender helps you to relax. Dab skin-safe lavender oil on each person's wrist and temples. Keep a lavender bag in your handbag for fractious children to smell. Or make a sensory box filled with lavender. Buy it in bulk online (www.driedlavender.co.uk), place it in a large plastic box, and hide small plastic toys amongst the tiny fragrant flowers.
- Do something kind together. When we think about helping someone else it makes us feel better too. So work as a team and bake a cake for a lonely person's birthday, make cookies for the local firemen, or make a card to send to someone.
- Being grateful soothes our thoughts and helps us to feel more positive. Go through the alphabet together thinking of everything you can be thankful for beginning with each of the letters.

- Blow bubbles together. When you blow bubbles you need to breathe in deeply and then breathe out really slowly. This kind of breathing calms your body. And bubbles are fun and pretty, so that helps you feel relaxed too! See who can blow the biggest bubbles, or make a giant bubble maker and some special bubble mixture. See www.happyhooligans.ca/homemade-giant-bubbles/
- Light candles, or use battery-operated candles that flicker like real ones. Just watching a candle can help you to feel calmer. In Scandinavian countries many people carry a candle in their emergency car kit. If their car breaks down in the night, or they get stuck in the snow, lighting the candle helps them to stay calm and think wisely about what to do next.
- Make something together – especially something simple and repetitive, because that can be really soothing. Knit, do tapestry, whittle wood, or fold unwanted book pages into creative patterns (www.foldedbookart.com).
- Check in with each other about what's bothering you the most. Then ask how you can support each other and make life a little less stressful for everyone.

(Inset)

DIY chill-out kit

Make your own chill-out kit so you can choose something soothing when you're feeling stressed out. Or make a kit for a friend going through a stressful time. Here are some things to pack into your kit:

- Soothing music CDs
- Hot chocolate sachets
- Favourite specialty tea bags
- Soothing bubble bath or bath salts
- Books of funny pictures or short inspiring stories (eg. the Chicken Soup series)
- A jigsaw or other puzzles that will distract you quietly for a while
- Scented tea-lights and candles
- Interesting colouring patterns and pencil crayons
- Pots of bubbles to blow
- A bag of dried lavender
- Massage oils, hand creams and instructions for a hand massage
- Golf balls – for rolling under your feet for a soothing rub
- A packet of bread mix to bake
- A notebook to write down all the things that fill you with gratitude
- Small craft kits or a small, ongoing project, like a tapestry, so that you can do something repetitive and creative
- A packet of thank you cards, stamps and a pen, so you can write thank you notes to people who have made a difference in your life
- A photo album of happy memories
- Postcards and pictures of calm places – choose one and imagine you're really there for a few minutes

Karen Holford chills out by seeing how long it takes for a square of dark chocolate to melt in her mouth, making things out of recycled materials, and losing herself in a second-hand book.

