

# Many mothers develop high levels of stress

**By DR. RICHARD EARLE**  
Being a mother has never been easy. Even today, mothers do the majority of cooking, cleaning, shopping and child raising in Canada. At the same time, more women than ever before are entering the workforce and juggling their daily homemaking responsibilities with work outside the home.

When we actually take the time to think about it, we all know how hard Mom works. That's why sales of chocolates, flowers and Hallmark cards boom every May when families celebrate Mother's Day. But for the remaining 364 days, most mothers are expected to be homemakers, wives, hostesses, lovers, nurses, and employees all at the same time.

The result is that many mothers - in the quest to be all things to all people - develop high levels of stress that are disruptive and unhealthy for both themselves and their families. It has been shown repeatedly that parents under chronic stress are more likely to display abusive behavior, suffer from depression and physical illness, and seek "relief" in alcohol and other drugs. The result, of course, is more unhappiness and dissatisfaction for all members of the family.

For most families, it is not easy for Mom to reduce her workload. This is particularly true for single mothers who need to work and can't rely on a partner to help out at home. There are, however, some simple steps that mothers can take to help prevent stress build-up in their lives.

### CARE OF SELF

The truth is that mothers shouldn't wait for Mother's Day before taking a break. They have to take the initiative by making time for themselves. It isn't easy and it requires a new spirit of cooperation from other family members. But it is important for Mom to make her own health and well-being a priority.

That means making one or two small lifestyle changes. Whether it's getting more exercise or sleep, eating nutritious food or taking time out for yourself. By making yourself a priority you will begin to recognize the connection between stress and personal health. A simple regime of steady exercise, an energizing diet and short relaxation breaks will make you more prepared physically to manage stress and tension.

## HIV patients need early support

People infected with the HIV virus may need support and treatment long before acquiring AIDS, says a University of Toronto doctor.

Preliminary results of an 18-month study headed by Mary Fanning of the U of T department of medicine indicate that before HIV-infected patients begin to experience the physical affects of the disease on their daily lives, their sense of worth and well-being are strongly affected.

"Whether this psychological trauma affects the progression of the disease remains to be determined," says Fanning, who conducted the study with Dr. Shelagh Emmott, a psychologist at the Toronto Hospital.

Their analysis is based on responses from 95 patients surveyed at the Toronto Hospital HIV clinic.

Eighty-six men and nine women in stages of HIV infection ranging from no symptoms to having AIDS, answered whether or not their illness is affecting 35 areas of their lives including career, daily activities, relationships, mood, identity, sexuality and spirituality.

The most significant findings to date relate to the patients' outlook and their ability to continue with their personal lives.

Whether at home or at work, anger and frustration are sometimes unavoidable. But there are positive and negative ways to deal with those emotions. The first step to bringing anger and frustration under control is recognizing your feelings. Admit to yourself that you are upset - and then try to isolate the cause of your frustration.

If possible, avoid issues and events that tend to upset you. When you must face a difficult

situation, plan ahead for a positive way to deal with it rather than just tolerating it. Afterwards, deal with any leftover frustration by reading a book, going for a walk or chatting with a friend. Coping with stress-related anger is never easy, but it can be done with a little bit of practice.

### STRESS EDUCATION

Perhaps the best tip for over-worked mothers is to learn more about stress and its effects on parents. This may seem like yet

another task; but if you take the few minutes required you will probably find that some of your other difficult moments become more manageable. One good source of information I've come across is the IOF Foresters, which has some very practical family literature that discusses parenting and coping with stress in the home. Parents can request free literature by calling the IOF Foresters toll-free at 1-800-268-6267.

Mothers, of course, are not alone in having to deal with stress. In my next column I'll look at some of the factors that can cause high stress for fathers. Specifically, we'll talk about the common problem of "perfectionism" and the pressure to become the perfect parent.

(Dr. Earle is President of the Canadian Institute of Stress and Consultant to the IOF Foresters Family Stress Program.)

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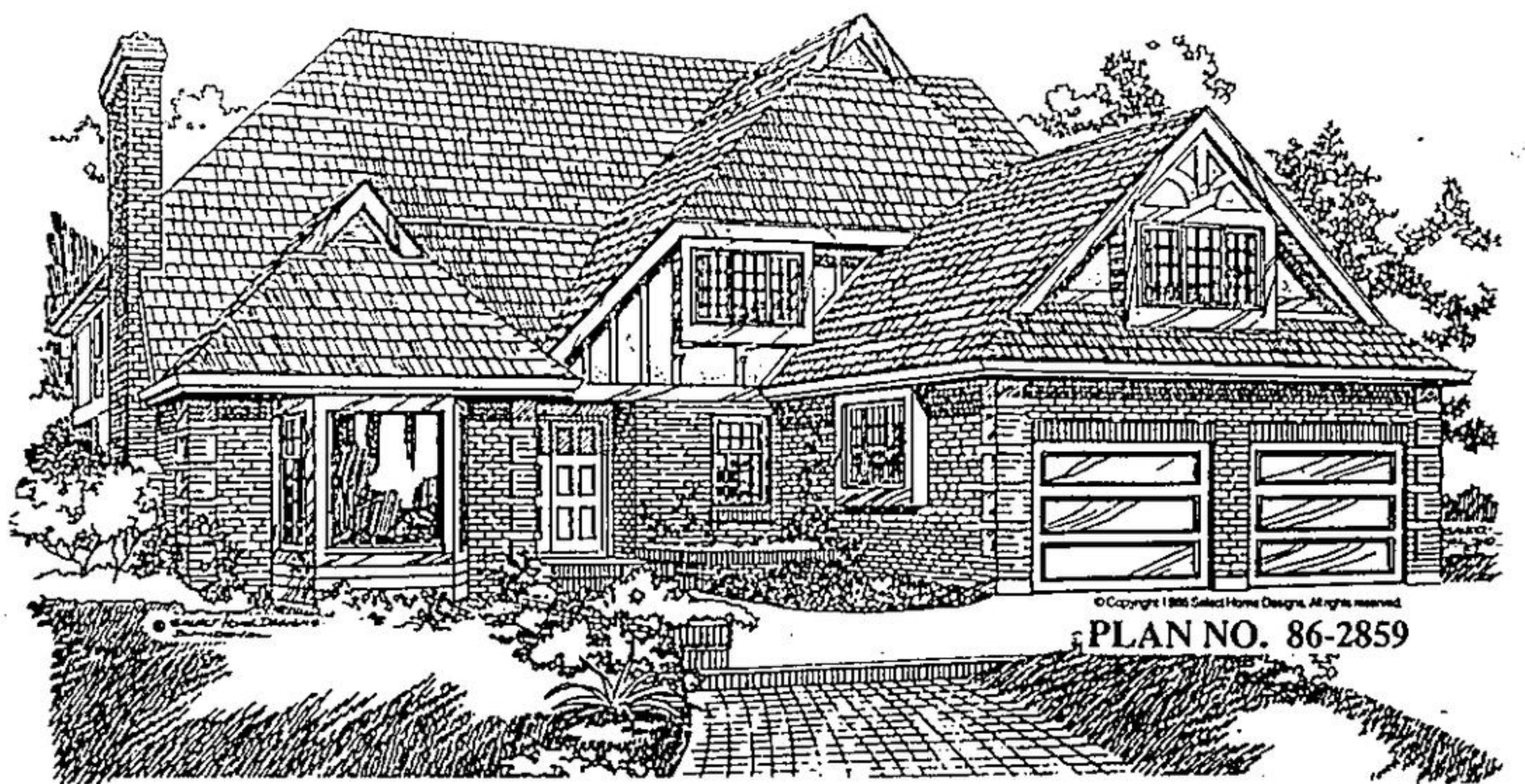
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