

# Dealing with the stresses of motherhood

**By George P. Matysek Jr.**

*gmatysek@CatholicReview.org*

*Twitter: @ReviewMatysek*

It's no secret that mothers face a whole host of stresses.

Whether it's worrying about the health of a child, figuring out how to spend money wisely or fearing the future state of the world, stress can weigh down mothers and hurt their health and well-being.

Dr. Patricia Fosarelli, associate dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park and a member of the faculty in the department of pediatrics at The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, believes it's important for mothers to recognize their worries and then develop ways to deal with them.

"Worry really does impact us," said Fosarelli, noting that there are two types of stress: that over which a person has no control (such as threats of terrorism) and that which a person can impact (such as paying a bill on time or preparing for a test).

"Worry sets us into the fight or flight response," she said. "That means you are preparing yourself to do battle."

Worry wears down the body, Fosarelli said. It can cause blood pressure to go up, heart rates to rise and respiration rates to increase. It can lead to sleeping or eating problems and can even affect the immune system.

Emotionally, Fosarelli said, worry can cause a person to be tense, irritable, weepy or depressed. Spiritually, worry can cause many to wonder where God is, or, for a small number of people, cause them to lose their faith.

"For some people, the best solution to their worry is prayer," Fosarelli said. "Some grow closer to God when they are mightily worried, while others seem to pull away from God. A lot depends on one's relationship with God before you get started and how severe the worry is."

In dealing with worry, Fosarelli said, discernment is key. Talk about concerns with a trusted friend or spiritual guide, she said, and don't be afraid to talk with God.

"What we know scientifically about prayer is that what has the most effect on the body, mind and spirit is the prayer that is most meaningful to the person," she explained.

For some, she said, that may mean saying the rosary or traditional formulaic

prayers. For others, it may mean talking with God informally as if talking to a friend or spouse.

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"As we connect with God in a meaningful way and not just go through the motions, endorphins are released," she said. "They actually have the effect of calming us down, but we only make endorphins when we are doing something meaningful or that gives us joy. We can't command them to come to us."

Mothers who worry frequently may benefit from hearing from someone who has the same kinds of worries, Fosarelli said. In conversation, they may find ideas for ways of alleviating that worry. Eating and sleeping properly and getting exercise are also beneficial, Fosarelli said.

"If worry seriously interferes with life," Fosarelli said, "professional help may be needed. If you can't think straight or you're messing up at work because your mind is on the worry, or if you can't sleep at night, those are signals that professional help may be needed."

Fosarelli encouraged mothers to look to the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary for solace and inspiration. Mary experienced some of the same stresses that today's mothers face: not fully understanding the actions of her Son and undergoing emotional torment when witnessing both adulation and derision directed at her Son. "Mary turned to her faith," Fosarelli said. "She maintained a relationship with God. She's a good model for mothers."