

Helping Teenagers Deal with Stress

FACTS FOR TEENS

What is Stress?

Stress is a natural feeling when something important is on the line. In medical terms, stress is known as the “fight, flight, or freeze response” because it triggers certain changes in our bodies (increased heart and breathing rate, increased blood flow to arms and legs, heightened awareness, speeding up of metabolism, etc.). This response keeps us in tune with our surroundings and prepares us to take action.

Everyone experiences stress, and not all stress is bad. In healthy circumstances, stress can assist with focus and provide energy for the task at hand. When the task is completed or the situation is resolved, the stress goes away. Stress becomes unhealthy, however, if it lingers too long and causes our bodies to remain in a constant state of arousal. For most teens, this occurs when they perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult or painful, and they perceive they do not have the resources to cope.

Sources of Stress

Stress can come from both internal and external sources, and every person is different (what one teen feels is stressful may not bother another teen at all). Some sources of stress for teens might include:

- School demands and frustrations (tests, homework, learning difficulties)
- Negative thoughts and feelings about themselves
- Physical changes in their body (type, rate)
- Friends (lack of friends, shyness, fights with friends, acceptance/rejection, peer pressure, girlfriend/boyfriend problems)
- Overload (being over-scheduled with sports and activities combined with school work, jobs, etc.)
- High expectations (perfectionistic expectations can come from both parents and the teen themselves)
- Deciding one’s future (college planning, job planning) and transitioning to adulthood
- Moving/changing schools
- Family financial problems
- Separation or divorce of parents
- Death in the family

Symptoms of Stress

Physical signs

Headaches
Stomach aches
Muscle aches
Nervousness
Eating disorders (over & under)
Sleeping disorders

Mental Signs

Forgetfulness
Unorganized
Lack of concentration
Drop in grades

Emotional Signs

Anger quickly
Sadness
Impatience
Frustration
Easily agitated
Violent outbursts

Solutions and Resources

The first line of defense in dealing with stress for anyone (adults and teens alike) is regular exercise, a healthy diet, and good sleeping habits. Other ways you can cope with stress include:

- **Build a network of friends** who help you cope in positive ways. Don’t choose (or get talked into) using illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco as your coping mechanism.
- **Develop assertiveness skills.** It’s okay to state how you feel in a polite, firm, and not overly aggressive or passive ways. For example: “I feel angry when you yell at me” or “I feel _____ when you _____.” Don’t be afraid to stick up for yourself.
- **Learn practical and effective coping skills.** For example, break large tasks into smaller units; ask for advice/help on how to deal with stressful situations from teachers, friends, and parents.
- **Rehearse and practice situation that cause stress.** If you have to have a difficult conversation with someone, rehearse it beforehand; if making a presentation stresses you out, practice ahead of time.
- **Decrease negative self-talk.** Challenge negative thoughts about yourself with alternative neutral or positive thoughts. “My life will never get better” can be transformed into “I may feel hopeless now, but my life will probably get better if I work at it and seek help.”
- **Take a break from stressful situations and learn how to relax.** Exercise, deep breathing, talking to a friend, listening to music; when you’re stressed out, stop and engage in an activity you enjoy.
- **Learn to feel good about doing a competent job** rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others.