

Helping Teenagers Deal with Stress

FACTS FOR PARENTS

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 help your child cope with stress include:

- **Encourage your child to talk about what he or she is going through, and be willing to listen.** Don’t automatically jump to conclusions and give advice; don’t say “you’ll get over it” or minimize the problem.
- **Spend quality time with your child (schedule free time with them), and offer reassurance, encouragement, and support.** Even if they reject your efforts, be patient and keep with it; this lets them know you are there for them.
- **Continue to provide structure, stability, and predictability.** This includes sticking to age-appropriate responsibilities and rules in the face of their attempt to negotiate new rules.
- **Encourage participation in activities, and help your child set realistic expectations for him/herself.** This includes managing your own messages – do you expect perfection in your child? Also, be careful about overscheduling.
- **Allow your child to overcome challenges on their own without bailing them out all the time (aka build Resiliency in your child).** Smoothing all the bumps out of their road deprives them of the experience of working through things on their own, which develops feelings of competence and power. They learn basic problem-solving skills by doing.
- **Model effective stress management and coping skills.** Make managing stress a part of your family conversation, and share information on how you overcome stress in your life (deep breathing, reading, visual imagery, journaling, etc.)