

Helping Children Cope with Stress

STRESS can affect anyone—even a child—who feels overwhelmed. Stress comes from the demands placed on a person and his or her ability (or perceived ability) to meet them. Childhood stress comes from outside sources (family, friends, school, illness, death of loved ones, divorce, and disasters) and from within (pressures children place on themselves).

What are the signs my child is feeling stress?

- Mood swings
- Acting out
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Bedwetting
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Nightmares
- Separation anxiety
- Overreactions to problems
- Drastic changes in academic performance
- Refusal to participate in activities
- Trouble concentrating
- Problems completing schoolwork
- Withdrawal
- Regression (common in younger children; may include thumb sucking, hair twirling)
- Lying, bullying, and defiance of authority (common in older children)

You may not be able to keep your child from feeling frustrated, sad, or angry, but you can help him or her cope with these emotions.

Seek help when problems appear to be serious and/or interfere with daily living. Talk to your child's doctor or a counselor.



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K-12 Student Mental Health Initiative
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www.ocde.us/HealthyMinds

Source: SAMSHA

How can I help my child?

- Make time for your child each day.
- Give your child lots of hugs and kisses.
- Notice your child's feelings out loud.
- Listen to your child—allow him or her to talk about things that may be causing stress.
- Help your child by discussing potentially stressful situations and helping him or her prepare for them.
- Just be there. Respect your child and tell him or her you'll be there when he or she is ready to talk.
- Be patient. Resist the urge to fix every problem. Help your child grow into a good problem solver.
- Avoid talking about your troubles around your child.
- Ensure that your child gets proper rest.
- Ensure that your child gets proper nutrition—balanced meals and regular eating times.
- Ensure that your child gets enough exercise.
- Avoid overscheduling. Help your child manage his or her time and responsibilities.
- Ensure that your child has play time and quiet time.
- Monitor exposure to news about trauma.

Teen Stress and What to Do About It

What Teens Can Do to Reduce Their Stress

- Exercise and eat regularly.
- Get enough sleep; teens need about 9 hours of sleep per night to be sufficiently rested.
- Avoid excess caffeine intake which can increase feelings of anxiety & agitation.
- Avoid illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco.
- Learn relaxation exercises (abdominal breathing and muscle relaxation techniques).
- Develop assertiveness training skills. For example, state feelings in polite, firm and not overly aggressive or passive ways: "I feel angry when you yell at me. Please stop yelling at me."
- Rehearse and practice situations which cause stress. One example is taking a speech class if talking in front of a class makes you anxious.
- 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 get some help."
- Learn to feel good about doing a competent or "good enough" job rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others.
- Take a break from stressful situations. Activities like listening to music, talking to a friend, drawing, writing, or spending time with a pet can reduce stress.
- Build a network of friends who help you cope in a positive way.

Teenagers, like adults, may experience stress every day and can benefit from learning stress management skills. Most teens experience more stress when they perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult, or painful and they do not have the resources to cope. Some sources of stress for teens might include:

- School demands and frustrations
- Negative thoughts and feelings about themselves
- Changes in their bodies
- Problems with friends and/or peers at school
- Unsafe living environment/neighborhood
- Separation or divorce of parents
- Chronic illness or severe problems in the family
- Death of a loved one
- Moving or changing schools
- Taking on too many activities or having too high expectations
- Family financial problems

Some teens become overloaded with stress. When it happens, inadequately managed stress can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, physical illness, academic shutdown, or poor coping skills such as drug and/or alcohol use.

When we perceive a situation as difficult or painful, changes occur in our minds and bodies to prepare us to respond to danger. This "fight, flight, or freeze" response includes a faster heart and breathing rate, increased blood to muscles of arms and legs, cold or clammy hands and feet, upset stomach and/or sense of dread.

The same mechanism that turns on the stress response can turn it off. As soon as we decide that a situation is no longer dangerous, changes can occur in our minds and bodies to help us relax and calm down. This "relaxation response" includes decreased heart rate and breathing rate and a sense of well-being. Teens that develop a "relaxation response" and other stress management skills feel less helpless, more in control and have more choices when responding to stress.

Parents can help their teen in these ways:

- Listen carefully to teens and watch for overloading
- Learn and model stress management skills
- Support involvement in exercise, sports and other pro-social activities
- Monitor if stress is affecting teen's health behavior, thoughts, or feelings

By using these and other techniques, teenagers can begin to manage stress. If a teen talks about or shows signs of being overly stressed, a consultation with a child and adolescent mental health professional may be helpful.

Source: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Facts for Families Bulletin
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