

## STRESS and your child

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Stress is a feeling that is created in reaction to pressure from the outside world, from within our selves, or from both. It is the body's way of preparing for a tough situation by increasing its strength, stamina, and sense of awareness. Not all stress is bad. Stress enhances our ability to perform well under pressure. This is important in everyday life such as meeting a deadline and it is important in dangerous situations where the fight, flight, or freeze response could actually save our lives. Stress becomes a problem when our daily lives cause our bodies to remain in an on-going "stress response state" for too long. When this happens it can leave a person feeling depleted, burned out, or overwhelmed. Long-term stress can also weaken the immune system and cause other physical problems.

A recent phenomenon is that American children, tweens, and teens are experiencing heightened levels of on-going stress. As a result of our increasingly competitive "success-oriented" culture, children are exposed to stress on a regular basis. They see their parents stressed out from balancing work and home responsibilities. They feel pressure not only to get good grades but also to be involved in numerous extracurricular activities so that they can get into a "good" college. They experience regular occurrences of conflict and loss caused by navigating the social politics of adolescent life. These losses can include break-ups of friendships or romantic relationships, loss of a "good grade" on a test, loss of social status in the school population hierarchy, loss of self respect/self esteem after an embarrassing social faux pas, loss of a parent caused by death or divorce, or loss of a dream/goal.

The danger of this phenomenon is that kids do not have the same maturity level to understand that these stressors are temporary. They do not have the coping mechanism to put these events into proper perspective. This leaves the teen vulnerable to destructive forms of dealing with stress including using drugs and alcohol, withdrawing into themselves which can lead to depression, pushing harder to achieve more which can lead to anxiety and exhaustion, or looking for something in their lives that they have full control over which can manifest itself in eating disorders. There is also a risk that if teens feel isolated, overwhelmed, and/or unsupported, that they will consider suicide as a viable solution to their problems.

Signs of stress overload in teens are as follows:

- irritability and moodiness
- sadness or depression
- physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, chest pain
- allergic reactions such as eczema, asthma, or hives
- trouble sleeping at night and/or tired during the day
- laughing or crying for no reason
- anxiety or panic attacks
- blaming others for bad things that happen to them
- only seeing the down side of a situation
- things that they used to enjoy aren't fun anymore and/or seem burdensome
- resenting other people

Parents can help their teens minimize ongoing stress by:

- Listening carefully to their kid's problems. Don't judge them or minimize their importance. Understand that their children's problems are as real to them as the parent's problems are to themselves.
- Learn and model healthy stress management skills such as eating well-balanced meals, drinking less caffeine, getting enough sleep, and exercising on a regular basis. Don't use drugs or alcohol to take the edge off at the end of a stressful day.
- Learn and model practical coping skills such as breaking a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks.
- Learn and model feeling good about doing a competent or "good enough" job rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others.

- Suggest that they take a break from stressful situations. Activities like listening to music, drawing, writing, yoga, abdominal breathing, or spending time with a pet can reduce stress. Reduce the amount of extracurricular scheduled activities and allow for some unscheduled, relaxing “down time”.
- **Find a therapist for your child. Talking to a person other than a parent can help because it gives the teen a chance to express their feelings without worrying about disappointing or hurting the parent. Therapists who work with adolescents are well versed in the issues facing them in their daily lives and can offer objective, effective solutions.**

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