



Teen Stress

Teens feel the pressure



“I think stress is a problem for teenagers like me... because when you get a certain age, you start worrying about certain things, like, when your puberty comes, your body starts to develop more, and then you get to worry about school, your families, and what most people think about you.”
Girl, 14

You may have caught yourself thinking, “Teen stress? Wait until they’re older—then they’ll know stress.”

Yet teen stress is an important health issue. The early teen years are marked by rapid changes—physical, cognitive, and emotional. Young people also face changing relationships with peers, new demands at school, family tensions, and safety issues in their communities. The ways in which teens cope with these stressors can have significant short- and long-term consequences on their physical and emotional health. Difficulties in handling stress can lead to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety disorders.

What is stress? It is the body’s reaction to a challenge, which could be anything from outright physical danger to asking someone for a date or trying out for a sports team. Good and bad things create stress. Getting into a fight with a friend is stressful, but so is a passionate kiss and contemplating what might follow.

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The hypothalamus signals the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. The hormones speed

THINGS THAT CAN CAUSE YOUTH STRESS

- School pressure and career decisions
- After-school or summer jobs
- Dating and friendships
- Pressure to wear certain types of clothing, jewelry, or hairstyles
- Pressure to experiment with drugs, alcohol, or sex
- Pressure to be a particular size or body shape. With girls, the focus is often weight. With boys, it is usually a certain muscular or athletic physique.
- Dealing with the physical and cognitive changes of puberty
- Family and peer conflicts
- Being bullied or exposed to violence or sexual harassment
- Crammed schedules, juggling school, sports, after-school activities, social life, and family obligations

up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, pupils dilate to improve vision, and the liver

releases stored glucose to increase the body’s energy. This physical response to stress kicks in much more quickly in teens than in adults because the part of the brain that can calmly assess danger and call off the stress response, the prefrontal cortex, is not fully developed in adolescence.

The stress response prepares a person to react quickly and perform well under pressure. It can help teens be on their toes and ready to rise to a challenge.

The stress response can cause problems, however, when it overreacts or goes on for too long. Long-term stressful situations, like coping with a parent’s divorce or being bullied at school, can produce a lasting, low-level stress that can wear out the body’s reserves, weaken the immune system, and make an adolescent feel depleted or beleaguered.

The things that cause adolescents stress are often different from what stresses adults. Adolescents will have different experiences from one another, as well. A good example of this can be seen by observing teens at a dance.

Some are hunched in the corner, eyes downcast and hugging the wall. They can’t wait for the night to be over. Others are out there dancing their feet off, talking and laughing and hoping the music never stops. In between, you

may find a few kids pretending to be bored, hanging out with their friends, and maybe venturing onto the floor for a dance or two. So, is the dance uniformly stressful?

Several strategies can help teens with their stress. It is best, whenever possible, to help teens address stressful situations immediately. Listen to them, be open, and realize that you can be supportive even if you cannot relate to what they are feeling. Tune in to your own levels of stress, since your overwhelmed feelings can be contagious. For chronic stress, parents or caring adults can help teens understand the cause of the stress and then identify and practice positive ways to manage the situation.



SIGNS AN ADOLESCENT IS OVERLOADED

- Increased complaints of headache, stomachache, muscle pain, tiredness
- Shutting down and withdrawing from people and activities
- Increased anger or irritability; i.e., lashing out at people and situations
- Crying more often and appearing teary-eyed
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Chronic anxiety and nervousness
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits, i.e., insomnia or being “too busy” to eat
- Difficulty concentrating

STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE—& ADULTS

- Talk about problems with others
- Take deep breaths, accompanied by thinking or saying aloud, “I can handle this”
- Perform progressive muscle relaxation, which involves repeatedly tensing and relaxing large muscles of the body
- Set small goals and break tasks into smaller, manageable chunks
- Exercise and eat regular meals
- Get proper sleep
- Break the habit of relying on caffeine or energy drinks to get through the day
- Visualize and practice feared situations
- Focus on what you can control (your reactions, your actions) and let go of what you cannot (other people’s opinions and expectations)
- Work through worst-case scenarios until they seem amusing or absurd
- Lower unrealistic expectations
- Schedule breaks and enjoyable activities
- Accept yourself as you are; identify your unique strengths and build on them
- Give up on the idea of perfection, both in yourself and in others

SOURCE: Dyl, J. Helping teens cope with stress. *Lifespan*. Retrieved from www.lifespan.org/services/childhealth/parenting/teen-stress.html

For additional resources, please refer to *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*. Science-based and accessible, this guide is a practical and essential resource for parents and all people who work with young people.

“Add this book to the ‘must-read’ list.”
—Karen Pittman,
Forum for Youth
Investment



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