

Helping Teenagers With Stress

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 this happens, inadequately managed stress can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, physical illness, 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 faster heart and breathing rate, increased blood to muscles of the arms and legs, cold or clammy hands and feet, upset stomach, and/or a sense of dread. The same mechanism that turns on the stress response can turn it off. As soon as we decide 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, breathing rate and a sense of wellbeing. Teens that develop a "relaxation response" and other stress management skills feel less helpless and have more choices when responding to stress.

Parents Can Help Their Teen In These Ways

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

Teens Can Decrease Stress With The Following Behaviors And Techniques

Exercise and eat regularly. Avoid excess caffeine intake which can increase feelings of anxiety and agitation. Avoid illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Learn relaxation exercises (abdominal breathing and muscle relaxation techniques). Develop assertiveness training skills, for example, state your feelings in a polite yet firm and not overly aggressive or passive way ("I feel angry when you yell at me" or "Please stop yelling."). Rehearse and practice situations which cause stress. One example is taking a speech class if talking in front of a class makes you anxious. Learn practical coping skills, for example, break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks.

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.

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 psychiatrist or qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

