

Helping Teenagers Deal With Stress: How to Help your Teenager Develop a “Relaxation Response”

Teenagers may experience stress everyday and can benefit from learning stress management skills. Lacking the internal resources to deal with a situation for which your teen believes he has no resources to cope, is the primary reason a teen becomes stressed. Remember, your teenager’s goal is to figure out his future path, where she fits in the world. Your teen may perceive a situation as unmanageable, dangerous, difficult or painful. Many teens feel they are "pushed to the brink" by performance pressure. 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
- heavy emotions that can accompany a broken heart or the death of a loved one
- 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
- lack of sleep
- Unhealthy diet

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 your teen perceives 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 a 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 and breathing rate and a sense of well being. Teens who develop a "relaxation response” and other stress management skills feel they are ‘in charge’ and have more choices when responding to stress.

Parents can help their teen in these ways:

- Monitor if stress is affecting their 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
- Be on the lookout for negative self talk. This may be a sign that your teen needs professional help. "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.”

Exercise can re-generate brain cells and make a person feel energetic, and therefore increase self-confidence. It is a great stress reliever and a great life-long habit to ensure health, happiness and success. Relaxation exercises such as Yoga, abdominal breathing and muscle relaxation, are recommended. Many teens have yet to learn the magic of exercise, meditation, music, and downtime.

Protect sleep at all costs. Sleep-deprived teens are more likely to fight, drink, have sex, get depressed and consider suicide, says a study released in September by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Eating regular, nutritious, balanced meals (avoiding caffeine and fast-food) helps teens by breaks, a providing 'brain food,' providing a schedule, and providing a social break, which may be a chance to recharge. Family meals go a long way to build confidence and time management.

Encourage your teens to talk to a family member or a trusted adult as a way to lower stress, too. As parents, we want our teens to come to us and talk, but because a major emotional goal of teen development is independence, confiding in a parent may not happen. If this is the case, help your teen find an adult who she can trust, and you can trust, too. Talk about feelings with kids openly, and catch the chance of teachable moments in day-to-day life. Model appropriate ways to manage negative emotions, such as anger, depression. Help your teen develop assertiveness. 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.")

Help your teen **rehearse and practice situations which cause stress.** One example is taking a speech class if talking in front of a class makes your teen anxious.

Teach your teen to **be realistic.** Don't ask for perfect — no one can be perfect! And expecting others to be perfect can add to your stress level, too (not to mention put a lot of pressure on them!). Teach your student that, if he needs help on something, like schoolwork, ask for it!

Share a similar struggle. When you remember and share your own teenage struggles you normalize what your teenager is experiencing. He'll feel safe talking to you because you've been through stressful phases too. By acknowledging that her struggles are part of maturing, you help your teen accept herself.

Drop the inquisition. When your teen walks in from school, instead of asking "How did you do on your math test," try asking, "How was your day?" You may get nothing more than "fine," and that is just fine. Many teens just need a break after school.

When your teen wants to add a club, sport or class, ask them to **add up the time it takes to do each thing in their day**, including homework, eating, sleeping and socializing. Many teens have a skewed idea of how long it takes to fully complete projects or homework, especially if social media gets in the way of completion. If your teen schedules 28 hours a day of involvement, it should be clear that this just isn't going to work. Help your teen manage time by asking her to break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks

•**Talk to teachers and counselors.** Often, teens bring home mediocre grades and parents start hiring tutors without speaking to the school. A better idea: meet with the counselor, the teacher and your teen to find solutions.