



Research Brief

Stress in adolescents

Question: What teaching strategies will help to reduce student stress?

Summary of Findings: Both males and females have about the same amount of stress in their lives, however, the causes are different. For females it is most frequently caused by feelings about relationships, which in turn, may affect with whom they identify, such as parents, friends, and teachers. For males, the causes are usually outside of relationships and come from things such as school activities and change, as in moving from one place to another. A major life event can create stress which then can snowball into the rest of the student's life. The reverse is more often true, that many small stressors begin to add up and the student believes that his/her life is totally stressful.

Stress appears to be felt strongly when the teen feels threatened or endangered and does not believe he/she has the coping mechanisms to handle the situation. When the brain receives a stress signal, it releases a hormone called norepinephrine which creates the "fight or flight" response. When this hormone is prevalent, the person is unable to learn or do anything other than protect him/herself. When the brain feels safe, the body can relax and the student is then able to learn. During times of stress it is important for the adolescent to learn how to focus on what is important, then control what is in his/her power.

Major Findings and Conclusions:

Potential Causes of Stress

1. Issues and pressures with school, including over-extension of time, involvement in too many activities, and/or too many deadlines at the same time.
2. Poor self-image that could stem from appearance, dress, popularity, lack of acceptance, and/or less than anticipated grades.
3. Problems with relationships including with significant others, friends, parents, and/or teachers.
4. Living in and/or going to school in a perceived unsafe environment.
5. Moving to a new area.
6. Problems with and/or between parents.
7. Death of someone close to the student.
8. Unrealistic expectations of self-created by self, parents, teachers, and/or peer group.
9. Argumentative home environment.
10. Serious illness of self, relative, and/or friend.

Triggers to Help Detect if a Student is Stressed

1. A student comes from a family with a history of issues such as depression, chemical dependency, death of someone close to the student, single parent family, continuous family conflicts, and/or frequent movement of family.
2. A dramatic change in personality such as aggressive behavior, withdrawal, belligerence, rebellion, lying, overachieving, and extreme perfectionism.



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3. Dramatic mood changes.
4. Not eating or sleeping well.
5. Loss of interest in life, activities, and/or relationships.

Ways to Support a Stressed Adolescent

When it appears that a student might be feeling undue stress, it is important for the significant people in the adolescent's life to compare notes. Often when all the pieces are put together, the whole situation is more easily seen and can be appropriately handled.

1. Be available to listen.
2. Take them seriously.
3. Do not offer platitudes such as, "Don't worry," "You're over reacting," "Cheer up," etc.
4. Encourage them to talk. Ask open-ended questions such as:
Of what are you afraid? Do you feel you've fallen short in someone's eyes? Whose? Why do you think that happened? What is your role in what has happened?
What is your responsibility in this situation? Ideally, what outcome do you want?
5. Teach them coping strategies such as problem solving to either change or eliminate the stress by standing back from it and thinking it through by identifying the problem, determining potential solutions, and listing the pros and cons of their solutions.
6. Teach them how to manage emotions such as: writing down their feelings, thinking before responding, counting to ten before reacting, asking him/herself, "Of what am I afraid?," rehearsing ideas before sharing them with a phrase such as, "When you _____ (name the action), I feel _____ (name the emotion) and this is what I need from you _____ (state the desired outcome), and practicing deep breathing and visualization.
7. Teach them how to chunk stressors, issues, and tasks so that they are doable in smaller amounts.
8. Encourage them to find activities that are stress relievers such as participating in a physical activity, doing something with their hands like art work, reading, watching T.V., talking with a friend, playing a video game, etc.
9. Teach them to acknowledge completion of projects as a way of not expecting perfection.
10. Encourage them to eat healthy and drink ample amounts of water.
11. Encourage them not to smoke, use illegal drugs, or drink.

Online Resources:

- Diseases & Conditions. Stress in adolescents
Contains descriptions of issues that cause stress in adolescents.
<http://health.discovery.com/encyclopedias/illnesses.html?article=3162&page=1>
- Diseases & Conditions. Stress
A brief descriptive overview of issues that create stress and suggestions for how to help teens deal with



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them.

<http://health.discovery.com/encyclopedias/illnesses.html?article=3096&page=1>

- Helping teenagers with stress
A list of sources of stressors and some suggestion alleviate and lessen stress.
<http://www.focusas.com/Stress.html>
- Helping your teen control stress
A brief list of suggestions for things adults can do to help adolescents get unstressed.
<http://www.tnpc.com/parentalk/adolescence/teens48.html>
- Helping young adolescents deal with stress
Concise descriptions of things that can cause stress and ideas for ways to handle them.
http://www.nncc.org/SACC/sac42_adolesc.stress.html
- Stress Management for Adolescents
A description for an on-line course that deals specifically with the issue of stress management for adolescents.
http://www.counselingceusonline.com/stress_management_for_adolescents.htm
- Stress patterns in adolescence differ between boys and girls
A brief synopsis about the different issues that create stress in males and females.
<http://www.hbns.org/newsrelease/stresspatterns5-21-99.cfm>
- Supporting distressed young people
Succinct, yet comprehensive ideas and suggestions for ways to provide support to teens who are experiencing stress.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE2786.html>
- Teenagers and Stress
Bibliography of books and articles on this topic that are available for preview.
http://www.questia.com/Index.jsp?CRID=teenagers_and_stress&OFFID=sel&KEY=stress_and_adolescents
- Teens in distress series. Adolescent stress and depression.
Provides descriptors of some of the causes of stress and depression in teenagers.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/youthdevelopment/DA3083.html>
- Teens in distress series. Helping Friends in Trouble: Stress, Depression, and Suicide
A clear and succinct list of ways for a teenager to recognize stress, handle it, and how to help friends who are in stressful situations.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/youthdevelopment/DA2787.html>



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