

# Stress Management

*Your Dilemma:*

**“Nicholas has to give an oral report tomorrow, and he’s really stressed out. I don’t know how to help him calm down.”**

*or*

**“Talisha has been having trouble sleeping. I think something is bothering her.”**



## **ACTION TIPS**

- ◆ Help young people regain their sense of control and personal power by sharing relaxation techniques with them. You might try teaching your children breathing exercises or learning meditation techniques together.
- ◆ Pay attention to signs of stress in your children. When they want to talk, be available to listen and give support and affection.
- ◆ Encourage your children to go to the source of stress when a specific relationship is the cause. Sometimes a reasonable conversation can work wonders.
- ◆ Talk openly about upcoming changes, and ask your children about changes that are occurring in their lives.
- ◆ Model a lifestyle that’s as stress-free as possible—make an effort to eat well, get plenty of rest, and make time for your family.
- ◆ Help your adolescent learn that it’s okay to say no—that having too much to do can be overwhelming.
- ◆ Encourage your children to plan ahead for their day’s activities. To-do lists and daily goals can help give a feeling of organization and control.

**FACT:** Many scientists and health professionals agree that stress is a factor in more than 80 percent of illness, physical dysfunction, and pain.

From: *Emotional Health*, Iowa Public Television

**S**tress is a serious problem for nearly everyone in our society—and not just adults. The care-free days of youth are really a myth. For some young people, there's school, work, sports, and homework, just for starters. That's not counting various pressures from family and peers to succeed, to fit in, to care for brothers and sisters, and to make decisions about the future. That's a lot to have on your mind. For many others, there's boredom, which brings its own form of stress.

A little stress can be good; it keeps us alert and on our toes. But too much stress is harmful—whether it's short-term or whether it hangs around, causing long-term problems. Young people suffering from too much stress may be irritable and may not get along well with others. They may have difficulty concentrating on important matters like school and work. They may not be able to sleep. Their appetite may disappear, or they may overeat.

Young people who don't know how to handle stress may feel like their world is falling apart. They may not know where to turn or how to start making things better. For that matter, they may not even realize they are under stress. That's where we can help.

The developmental assets are positive qualities, experiences, and skills that children need to grow up healthy and responsible. Parents, grandparents, stepparents, or any other guardian of a child can use these assets as a framework to help them think through the new experiences they're encountering with their children. When trying to help your children deal with stress, the assets you may want to consider looking at for guidance are Personal Power, Positive Family Communication, Adult Role Models, Resistance Skills, and Planning and Decision Making.

ASSET TYPE	ASSET NAME	ASSET DESCRIPTION
Positive Identity	Personal Power	Young people feel that they have control over many things that happen to them.
Support	Positive Family Communication	Young people turn to their parents for advice and support. They have frequent, in-depth conversations with each other on a variety of topics. Parents are approachable and available when their children want to talk.
Boundaries and Expectations	Adult Role Models	Parents and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
Social Competencies	Resistance Skills	Young people can resist negative peer pressure and avoid dangerous situations.
Social Competencies	Planning and Decision Making	Young people know how to plan ahead and make choices.

## PERSONAL POWER



One of the main aspects of stress is that we feel a loss of control. **It's important to help young people regain their feeling of power. You can do this by teaching them relaxation techniques.** Try a deep-breathing exercise in which you inhale for a slow count of six, hold the breath for a count of four, and then release the breath over a count of six. This process is repeated several times. Meditation, yoga, and listening to music are other great stress relievers. Writing about feelings in a notebook or reading an inspirational book can provide comfort and relief. Another idea is to encourage young people to ask a family member to play a game or go for a walk when they're feeling wound up. Physical activity or playing with a pet are also great ways to rid the body of tension.

## POSITIVE FAMILY COMMUNICATION



Continued communication is a key factor in managing stress. **It's important for adolescents to know they have an open invitation to talk when something is bothering them.** Stress only gets worse if we pretend nothing is wrong. Young people, however, may not recognize that they're stressed. You may have to look for them to say phrases like "I'm worried," "freaked out," "tense," "wound up," "ready to burst," "coming unglued," etc.

**Be there to simply listen if they have concerns and fears to tell you about.** And show them affection when they express anxiety—they need your support.

**When they come to you and tell you conflict with a certain person is causing them stress, encourage your children to talk with that person.** If need be, help them find a self-help group, counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist, especially if you recognize signs of depression.

A lot of stress is caused by change, even positive change. **You can try to head off stress by talking about upcoming changes.** Ask every day what's happening in your children's lives. Their information will alert you to any changes that could cause them worry.

**Talk about other issues that may cause stress in a young person's life.** These discussions can help prepare your children for situations they may experience, helping them to cope and relieving some stress. For example, if your son or daughter is a person of color, help your child to understand and address the issues of racism. If your child is gay or lesbian, explain the issues of homophobia and how to address discrimination.

## ADULT ROLE MODELS



How do you deal with stress? Chances are your children deal with their stress based on how they've watched you, so **learn to handle pressure in your own life.** Maintain your health with what keeps stress away in the first place. Exercise regularly. Eat healthy foods. Avoid caffeine. Get enough sleep. Take a little time every day to unwind, and share some of that time with your family. Laugh at something, rent a funny movie. And don't overbook your schedule. Treat yourself to lighting a candle and playing some music that relaxes you. Through your actions, your children will see that it's important to know how to relax.

## RESISTANCE SKILLS



There's much to be said for the ability to say no when it comes to stress management. When schedules are jam-packed, we often feel overwhelmed. **Help young people learn to set limits on their activities.** It's better to do a few activities well than to do a lot of things poorly while feeling stretched thin.

## PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING



Adolescents obviously can't plan for everything, but planning can be a great help when it comes to stress management. **Encourage your children to think ahead about their day's schedule.** Do they have any quizzes to prepare for? Are they up to date on assignments? Have they started working on the project that's due next week? Keeping a to-do list is an excellent way to cut down on stress, and crossing out items as they are finished provides a feeling of accomplishment. Young people may want to keep track of daily goals in a journal or diary. The sense of organization and control from these simple ideas can be a real stress reducer.

## GETTING RID OF THE JITTERS

Our body's natural reaction to stress is flight or fight. We can help our young people learn to cope instead. And with coping, the stomachaches from stress gradually go away—as do the jitters. We can give our children the tools to replace anxious feelings and responses with laughter and excitement. We can teach them how to bring peace into their lives.

- This handout is intended to provide parents with a positive approach to common parenting concerns. It is not intended to take the place of appropriate counseling or other professional help in serious situations.
- **Developmental assets help youth and their parents thrive.** To learn more about what assets can do for your family, visit [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org) or ask a parent educator in your community.
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# Signs of Stress

Young people may not notice their own signs of stress. Often, physical signs of stress are mistaken as an illness. If you think your child is suffering from stress, look for some of these signals:

## PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite or increased appetite
- Rashes
- Stomachaches
- Fatigue
- Increase in illnesses
- Rapid heart rate
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Nail or lip biting
- Frequent urination

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS

- Lack of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Decrease in school performance
- Inability to study
- Irritability
- Carelessness
- Boredom
- Nightmares
- Sadness or depression