

Learning About Stress in Teens

What is stress?

Stress is your body's response to a hard situation. Your body can have a physical, emotional, or mental response. Stress is a fact of life for most teens, and it affects everyone differently. What causes stress for you may not be stressful for someone else.

A lot of things can cause stress. You may feel stress when you take a test, do a class presentation, or prepare for a sports event. This short-term stress is normal and even useful. It can help you work hard or react quickly. For example, stress can help you finish an important job on time.

Stress also can last a long time. Long-term stress is caused by stressful situations or events. Examples of long-term stress may include pushing yourself to do well in school, feeling bad about your body or yourself, or having problems with your parents or family. Long-term stress can harm your health.

How does stress affect your health?

Have you ever had butterflies in your stomach before taking a test? Or felt your heart speed up when a teacher asked you a question you couldn't answer? These are symptoms of stress. If the stress is over quickly, your body goes back to normal and no harm is done.

But if stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can have bad effects. You may have trouble sleeping, feel tired a lot, or have headaches or stomachaches. Long-term stress can make you more likely to get sick, and it can make symptoms of some diseases worse. If you tense up when you are stressed, you may develop neck, shoulder, or low back pain. And stress is linked to high blood pressure and heart disease.

Stress also can change how you behave. You might feel cranky and get upset at small problems or get angry and yell at others. Stress might make it hard to focus on your schoolwork. It may affect how well you perform in sports or other activities. Stress also can make you worry a lot or think that bad things are going to happen to you.

What can you do to manage stress?

Relax your mind

- Write. It may help to write about things that are bothering you. This helps you find out how much stress you feel and what is causing it. When you know this, you can find better ways to cope.
- Let your feelings out. Talk, laugh, cry, and express anger when you need to. Talking with friends, family, a counselor, or a faith leader about your feelings is a healthy way to relieve stress.
- Spend less time on social media. While social media can be fun, it can also be stressful. Instead, do something else you enjoy. For example, go to a movie, play board games, practice a hobby, or do volunteer work.
- Meditate. This can help you relax, because you are not worrying about what happened before or what may happen in the future.
- Do guided imagery. Imagine yourself in any setting that helps you feel calm. You can use apps, videos, books, or a teacher to guide you.

Relax your body

- Do something active. Physical activity can help reduce stress. Get plenty of exercise every day.

- Go for a walk or jog, ride your bike, or play sports with friends.
- Do breathing exercises. For example, go to a quiet place, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. Inhale deeply, and exhale slowly. Repeat a few times.
 - Try yoga or tai chi. These techniques combine exercise and meditation. You may need some training at first to learn them.

What can you do to prevent stress?

- Feel good about how well you do things. You don't always have to be perfect.
- Challenge bad thoughts. For example, don't think "I'll never get this right." Instead, think "I've been practicing a lot, so I'll do better this time."
- Manage your time. This helps you find time to do the things you want and need to do. Break larger tasks into smaller ones. Write down what's very important and not so important to you, and use your list to help you make choices about how to best use your time.
- Limit your time on social media. Be careful that social media use isn't replacing things like spending time with friends or doing other things you enjoy.
- Get enough sleep. Your body recovers from the stresses of the day while you are sleeping.
- Get support. Your family, friends, and community can make a difference in how you experience stress.

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