

# A Teen's Personalized Guide to Managing Stress

## *An Overview of Stress - Its Causes and Effects*

### What Is Stress?

Stress is the uncomfortable feeling you get when you're worried, scared, angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed. It is caused by emotions, but it affects your mood and body. Many adults think that kids don't have stress because they don't have to work and support a family. They are wrong!

### What Causes Stress?

Stress comes from many different places.

*From your parents.* "Hurry up, finish this, do your homework, go out for the team, practice your music, do your best, stay out of trouble, make more friends, don't ever try drugs."

*From your friends.* "Be cool, try this, show us you aren't a loser, don't hang out with those dorks."

*Even from yourself.* "I need to lose weight, wear the right clothes, get better grades, score more goals, show my parents I'm not a baby."

*And from*

- Watching parents argue
- Figuring out how to be independent
- Feeling pressure to get good grades
- Being pressured to do something, like smoking.
- Not being good enough at sports
- Worrying about how your body's changing
- Worrying about neighborhood or world problems
- Feeling guilty

### How Does the Body Handle Stress?

First, here are 2 short definitions.

- *Hormone.* A chemical made by one part of the body to send a message to the rest of the body.
- *Nervous system.* The brain, spinal cord, and all of the nerves. The nerves send messages between your brain and the rest of your body.

The body is a finely tuned machine that can change quickly to do what we need it to do, like react to stress. The body actually has 2 different sets of nerves. One works while we're relaxed, and the other works when there's an emergency. These 2 systems cannot work together at the same time. It's important to know this because we can shut off the emergency system by turning on the relaxed system. That helps us feel better!

### **Is Stress Always Bad?**

Even though stress makes us feel uncomfortable, it's not always a bad thing. Sometimes stress can really help us deal with tough situations. A lot of stress changes our bodies quickly and helps us react to an emergency. A little stress keeps us alert and helps us work harder.

Ages ago, when people had to survive in the jungle, the emergency nervous system was a great thing to have. Imagine your great, great, great ancestors, Sam and Zelda, eating some berries and soaking up the sun. Suddenly they saw a tiger and they knew they had to run! Hormones gave them the huge burst of energy that they needed to escape.

How did their bodies react? First, Sam and Zelda got a sinking feeling in their stomachs as the blood in their bellies quickly went to their legs so they could run fast. Then, when they jumped to their feet, their hearts beat faster to pump more blood. As they ran from the tiger, they breathed faster to get more air. Their sweat cooled them as they ran. Their pupils became bigger so they could see in the dark, in case they needed to jump over a log while running away. They didn't think about anything but running because they weren't supposed to stop and figure out a friendly way to talk to the tiger.

Sam and Zelda would never have survived without the stress reaction, but stress helps us do more than run from tigers. It keeps us alert and prepared. (You can be sure that the next time Sam and Zelda sat down to munch on berries, they listened for the sounds of a tiger.)

Few of us need to outrun tigers today, but we all have worries that turn on some of those same stress responses. That panicky feeling you sometimes get when you're studying for a big test comes from your body's reaction to stress. Your heart beats almost as fast as it would if you were running from a tiger. Your breathing becomes heavier and you sweat, just as if you were getting ready to run.

### **If Stress Is a Survival Tool, Why Does It Make Us Feel Awful?**

Good old Sam and Zelda had few choices when the tiger chased them. Either the tiger ate them or they escaped. As sick as it sounds, if they'd been eaten, they wouldn't have had much to worry about anymore, right? If they lived, you can be sure their burst of energy allowed them to outrun the tiger or at least outrun Zok (their slower friend who was eaten by the tiger instead). In their run for survival, Sam and Zelda used up every drop of their hormones and then took a well-deserved nap.

In the modern world, our biggest worries are not usually about life or death. We don't really have to run away from our problems. But those same stress hormones stay in our bodies because unlike Sam and Zelda, we don't use them up by running. Instead, those hormones continue to hang around, unused and confused. They seem to be asking, "Why did my body stand still when that 'tiger' attacked?"

Even when there are no real emergencies, our emotions can make our bodies act like there is a huge emergency. This is because the brain controls both emotions and stress hormones. If your brain thinks something terrible is happening, your body will react as if it really is! Even a little bit of stress that never seems to go away can confuse the body. It makes the body work harder to prepare for an emergency that may not really be there.

A tiger running at you is a real crisis. If you believe a mild stress (like a math test) is an emergency, you will not be able to study. Your body will be preparing to deal with a real tiger. You won't be able to concentrate on anything but escaping. The trick is to figure out when something really is an emergency and when your emotions are only acting as if it is one.

## How Do People Deal With Stress?

Nobody can avoid all stress, but you can learn ways to deal with it. When you're stressed, it is normal to want to feel better. Some ways to deal with problems might make you feel better for a little while, but can make stress much worse later. Think about some of the ways people might deal with stress that can really mess them up.

- Drugs
- Cigarettes
- Alcohol
- Bullying
- Fighting

These harmful choices might feel good for a couple of minutes, but they can be dangerous. They end up messing up your life, and then you end up a lot more stressed. They're especially dangerous if they are the only way you manage stress. This is one of the ways addictions start.

There are many healthy ways of dealing with stress. They are safe, help you feel better, and end up making you happy.

## Tackling the Problem

***Point 1: Figure out what the problem is and make it manageable.***

- A lot of people deal with problems by ignoring them. This does not make them go away; usually they just get worse.

- People who try to fix their problems tend to be emotionally healthier.
- When it comes to work (like studying or chores), the best way to enjoy yourself is to get the work done first. Sometimes people say they will do fun things first and do their work later, but the problem is they're having less fun because they're worrying about the work they're ignoring. And of course, the longer they put it off, the more they worry.
- Fights with parents and friends don't go away unless you deal with what upset you in the first place, or unless everyone says they're sorry and decides to forgive each other.

Two ideas can help you manage a lot of work.

1. Break the work into small pieces. Then just do one small piece at a time, rather than look at the whole huge mess. As you finish each piece, the work becomes less overwhelming.
2. Make lists of what you need to do. This will help you sleep because your head won't spin with worry about whether you can do everything. At the end of the day, you will have less to worry about as you check off the things you have finished. You will look at the same huge amount of homework and say to yourself, "I can do this!"

***Point 2: Avoid things that bring you down.***

Sometimes we know exactly when we are headed for trouble. Avoiding trouble from a distance is easier than avoiding it up close. You know the people who might be a bad influence on you. You know the places where you're likely to get in trouble. You know the things that upset you. Choose not to be around those people, places, and things that mess you up.

***Point 3: Let some things go.***

It's important to try to fix problems, but sometimes there's nothing you can do to change a situation. For example, you can't change the weather, so don't waste your energy worrying about it. You can't change the fact that teachers must give tests, so start studying instead of complaining about how unfair they are. You can't control what admissions committees do behind closed doors, so after you've sent in your applications, just let it go. People who waste their energy worrying about things they can't change don't have enough energy left over to fix the things they can.

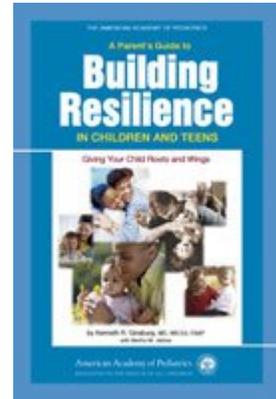
### **When to Turn for Help**

Even if you are great at dealing with problems, there may be times when stress feels like it is getting to you. You are not alone. This does not mean you are crazy and or a failure. Strong people turn to others for support when they have too much to handle. It's

OK to turn to wise friends for advice, but it is also important to turn to your parents or another adult to help you. *You deserve to feel good.*

The following signs suggest that you should seek some extra guidance:

- Your grades are dropping.
- You worry a lot.
- You easily get moody or angry.
- You feel tired all the time.
- You get a lot of headaches, dizziness, chest pain, or stomach pain.
- You feel sad or hopeless.
- You feel bored all the time and are less interested in being with friends.
- You are thinking about using alcohol or drugs to try to feel better.
- You ever think about hurting yourself.



**Remember that one of the best ways to be happy and successful is to manage stress well. You *can* do it!**

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