

# Stress in teenagers

If your child is stressed, they're not alone. Stress in teenagers is pretty common, so recognising stress and learning how to reduce stress are important life skills for teenagers. You can help your child by guiding them towards helpful ways of thinking and healthy lifestyle choices.

## Stress in teenagers: what is it?

Stress in teenagers – and anyone – isn't necessarily a bad thing. Stress is the way your body responds to challenges and gets you ready to face them with attention, energy and strength. Stress gets you ready for action. When you feel you can cope with these challenges, stress gives you the motivation to get things done. But there can be problems when your stress is greater than your ability to cope.

## Signs of stress in teenagers

Signs of stress in teenagers can show up in their behaviour, emotions, body and thinking.

Changes in **your child's behaviour** might include:

- withdrawing from friendship groups or activities she usually enjoys
- seeming nervous or anxious
- sleeping too little or too much
- eating more 'comfort food'
- eating less
- wanting to be by herself more than usual
- crying
- refusing to go to school
- having emotional 'ups and downs' for no obvious reason
- having less energy than usual
- drinking more caffeine products or taking over-the-counter painkillers – for example, paracetamol, codeine or ibuprofen
- being aggressive
- going down in schoolwork or results
- not caring about her appearance
- behaving differently in her relationship with you – for example, suddenly not talking to you.

You might also see some changes in **your child's emotions**, such as:

- being cranky or moody
- feeling sad, down or hopeless
- feeling worthless
- finding it hard to relax or switch off
- getting more angry more than usual
- feeling that 'nothing is going right'
- feeling like he's on an 'emotional rollercoaster ride'.

Sometimes you might see **physical signs** of stress. Your child might be:

- feeling sick – for example, headaches, shoulder pain, stomach aches, jaw pain
- not being hungry
- saying she feels more tired than usual, even if she's getting enough sleep
- losing or gaining weight
- getting frequent colds or infections
- having panic attacks, dizzy spells, fast breathing or pins and needles
- having changes in her period.

Finally stress can affect **your child's thinking**. You might notice that he is:

- finding it hard to concentrate and stay focused
- losing the thread of thoughts or conversations
- having trouble remembering things
- making snap decisions or errors in judgment
- having trouble organising and planning or making decisions
- getting confused or irrational.

### **Causes of stress in teenagers**

Some of the things that cause stress in teenagers include study worries, looking after other family members, friendships, family conflict, body image, work, bullying, discrimination, alcohol and other drug use, tension between cultural worlds, high personal expectations or high expectations from parents, teachers and friends. If you can keep an eye on things that could cause stress for your child, try to reduce those things and also respond early to signs of stress in teenagers, you might be able to prevent stress tipping over into **anxiety** and **depression**.

### **How to reduce stress in teenagers**

In general, you can help your child with stress by **listening**, spending time together and doing things that make your child feel good. You can also help your child reduce stress by working together on two key areas – helpful thinking and healthy lifestyle.

### **Helpful thinking to reduce stress in teenagers**

How you think about things affects how stressed you get by them. Like adults, teenagers can develop unhelpful thinking that makes it harder to deal with stressful things. Unhelpful thinking can get out of control, particularly if it becomes the normal way you think about things.

Some **common unhelpful thought patterns** are:

- mind-reading, or expecting other people to have a bad opinion of you – for example, 'They think I'm stupid', 'She thinks I'm no good at anything'
- thinking things will always go wrong – for example, 'Things never work out for me', 'Everyone is always against me', 'I'll never be able to ...'
- labelling yourself – for example, 'I'm no good', 'I'm stupid', 'I'm hopeless'
- absolute thinking – for example, 'I have to do it this way', 'This will never work'
- fortune-telling or expecting the worst – for example, 'I'm sure to mess this up', 'It's not going to work out anyway', 'I'm going to feel awful when it doesn't happen'
- all-or-nothing thinking – for example, 'He does everything right, and I always get it wrong', 'It has to be perfect', 'If only I had done it that way, it would be okay'.

### **Changing unhelpful thinking:**

Speaking to someone else can help your child to see that there are other ways of thinking about a situation. You and your child could try these techniques to change unhelpful thinking patterns:

With your child, work out what's causing the stress – for example, your child gets a last-minute text from a friend to cancel going out.

1. Encourage your child to list the thoughts connected to this situation or event – for example, 'He doesn't really like me', 'She should have told me sooner', 'My day's ruined'.
2. Help your child decide if the thoughts are helpful – for example, how does your child know her friend doesn't like her? Is it possible the friend couldn't have told her sooner? Are there other good things your child could do with the day?

3. Encourage your child to suggest some other thoughts – for example, ‘I don’t really know why he cancelled – there could be an emergency’, ‘Life has its ups and downs’, ‘I can go out anyway’, ‘This gives me time to do other things’, ‘I’m disappointed but I can cope’, or ‘We can go out together another day’.
4. Help your child notice that when she changes her thinking, her feelings also change – usually for the better.
5. **Healthy lifestyle changes to reduce stress in teenagers:** When your child feels stressed, it’s easy to forget to do everyday healthy things. Here are some healthy family lifestyle changes that you and your child can make to reduce stress:

**Do some physical activity:** cortisol can leave your child feeling tense. Exercise burns off cortisol and helps the body relax.

**Stay connected to family and friends:** plan some special time with your child when you know he’s feeling stressed. Positive relationships are the building blocks of mental health.

**Get enough sleep:** one of the biggest causes of stress in teenagers is not getting enough sleep. Your child still needs about 9¼ hours of sleep a night.

**Eat good food:** aim for a family diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegies, lean meat, dairy foods and wholegrains.

**Relax and unwind:** this might be going for a walk, reading a book, having a relaxing bath or listening to some music.

### **Stress and your body**

When you feel threatened, your body automatically gets you ready for a ‘fight or flight’ response. The problem is your brain doesn’t choose between real or imagined threats and responds automatically the same way to both.

Two powerful hormones – adrenaline and noradrenaline – get working. These hormones act to:

- speed up your reflexes so you can react quickly to threats
- raise your heart rate and blood pressure
- raise your blood sugar and body functioning to increase the performance of your big muscle groups and lungs
- burn energy quickly for fast physical activity
- shut down the digestive system
- divert blood away from your skin – this is why people under deep stress can have pale skin
- produce high-oxygenated blood – this can lead to blackouts and an irregular heartbeat
- thicken your blood, making your heart work harder.

**Cortisol**, which has been called the ‘stress hormone’, is also released. Cortisol puts your body on extra alert. Although it’s a natural body chemical, regular release of cortisol over a long time can weaken your immune system. Increased release of adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol as a reaction to hard-to-manage stress puts strain on your body and mind. Over time it damages overall health and wellbeing.

### **When to get help for stress in teenagers**

If your child’s stress won’t go away, your child’s worries have got worse over time, or your child’s stress is getting in the way of sleep, appetite, energy levels, enjoyment or socialising, it’s a good idea to seek help. In school, please contact the relevant House Team who can make referrals to the School Nurse or work with your child to address any school based concerns; out of school, your GP will be able to offer support in a variety of ways.

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