

Parenting Tip Sheet #1

Stress and Your Teen

“Are we being educated about what different levels of stress feel like, and how we can deal with it? Are we given tools to deal with it?”

No, we’re not. A lot of youth don’t know what it feels like to relax.”

- Respondent to BC Adolescent Health Survey

If your teenager seems more stressed out than you were at the same age, it’s not your imagination. Surveys show that today’s teens are dealing with higher levels of stress than past generations. Learning about stress and how to manage it helps children and youth become resilient in the face of life’s challenges and difficulties.

But first, let’s remember that stress is not always a bad thing. Stress is a normal part of life that can even be good for us. Our body’s stress response can give us the boost of energy that helps us meet challenges that lead to personal growth, that allows us to work hard and compete when we need to. Stress becomes a problem when we experience too much of it for too long, and haven’t learned healthy ways to manage and recover from negative stress.

“Stress makes the world go ‘round. It’s what leads us to adapt, what leads us to find solutions to problems, and leads us to explore the universe...”

- Dr. Stan Kutcher, teenmentalhealth.org

The problem with excessive stress

When the stress system works overtime, the parts of the brain that help us think, learn, make good decisions, and get along with people, gets blocked. The survival part of the brain takes over, and it is hard to think things through. Too much stress can cause emotional, social, learning, behaviour, mental health and physical health problems.

Signs that Stress is Becoming a Problem

- Increased irritability, sadness, anxiety or panic
- Trouble falling asleep
- Undereating or overeating
- A pattern of overreacting to minor problems
- An increase in nervous habits like nail biting or hair twisting
- Social withdrawal or difficulty getting along with others
- Concentration or motivation problems

All of the above problems can have other causes as well. But, remember that some emotional and behaviour problems that parents think of as misbehaviour or attitude can often be signs of excessive stress.



Teen Brain Development and Stress

During the teen years, important brain development is still taking place in the parts of the brain that are responsible for judging risks and rewards, decision making, planning, and understanding social and emotional information. The adolescent years are also a time of increased sensitivity to stress. Mental health problems often begin during this time in people's lives. For these reasons, it's important that we help youth better manage life's inevitable stressful times.

“I get stressed about meeting expectations – you see that in the classroom all the time.”

“By the time I'm finished with school and work, I just have nothing left.”

- Respondents to BC Adolescent Health Survey

What Stresses Teenagers?

- **School:** homework, juggling schoolwork with extracurricular activities. This type of stress intensifies towards the end of high school when young people are faced with important decisions about post-secondary education and careers.
- **Relationships:** relationship problems, feeling isolated, being bullied or victimized
- **Conflict:** with parents, friends, teachers and others
- **Money:** not having enough, having less money than one's friends, worry about the cost of post-secondary education
- **Challenging or negative life events:** a death in the family, family member's illness, the loss of a loved one, moving to a new neighbourhood or town
- **Social media:** most teens enjoy social media, but they can also find it stressful.

Dealing with Stress

The first step is recognizing when you are stressed and what is causing the stress. Some symptoms of being stressed out include feeling anxious, constantly irritated, unmotivated, overwhelmed, tired and having trouble sleeping.

Once we learn to recognize stress, there are two main ways of managing it: reducing stress and coping with stress.

Reducing Stress

When stress starts building up, the ideal solution is to reduce the amount you are exposed to. Reducing your stress load:

- prevents your stress response system from working too hard
- leaves you with more mental and physical energy for other priorities
- gives you more energy for coping with unavoidable stress

Coping with Stress

Some kinds of stress cannot be reduced. However we can still find ways to cope. Coping well means being able to tolerate stress when it's happening, and recovering – bouncing back – when the stressful situation is over.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and psychologyfoundation.org.

Parenting Tip Sheet #2

Helping your Teen with Stress

Too much stress can have negative effects on a teenager's mood, behaviour, learning, health, and the ability to get along with others. As parents, our goal is not to eliminate all stress (that's impossible anyway) though we can help our teens learn to recognize, deal with and recover from stress. Here are some ways to help.

Recognize the signs

Sometimes teenagers will recognize that they are highly stressed, and they may even be able to deal with it pretty well. Other times, they may need our help to understand what is going on. That's why it is important to watch for the signs of stress in their feelings and behaviour. These may include:

- unusual irritability, sadness, anxiety or panic
- behaviour that seems out of character
- undereating or overeating
- sleep problems
- a pattern of overreacting to minor problems
- social withdrawal or difficulty getting along with others
- difficulties with concentration and motivation about school or other activities

Identify the source of stress

After recognizing that your teen seems to need help dealing with excess stress, the next step is figuring out what the stressors are. All kinds of things can cause stress for older teenagers, including the desire for independence; school and planning for college or employment; relationships; money problems; and busy schedules. Today's teens are dealing with new sources of stress. That includes some things we don't usually think of as stressful, like not getting enough sleep, overexposure to screen time and the pressures of social media.

Help them manage stress

Reduce the source of stress when possible

Once the source of stress is known, try talking with your teen about what they might be able to do to reduce it. Could they spend less time with certain people or in situations that they find stressful? Do they need more sleep or help solving a problem? Be careful with these conversations. Teenagers like to be independent and can be easily turned off when parents act like they know what's best.

Help them solve problems

When stress is caused by a specific problem, it can often be reduced by finding a solution. Problem-solving is not always easy. But if you can encourage and help your teen develop the ability to think about and solve problems that are causing stress, you will be helping to build a very important stress management skill. One way to guide your child in solving problems is by helping them break it into smaller pieces, and work on one piece at a time together towards the hoped-for end result.

Encourage your child to find and use positive coping strategies

People have various ways of coping with stress: listening to music, talking problems over with friends, deep breathing, yoga, meditation, doing hobbies or favourite activities. Many people find that physical activity helps get rid of the tension. Not everybody copes the same way. The point is to help teens figure out what works for them. Role modeling positive coping strategies for your teen is also helpful!

Provide a stress-friendly home base

A healthy diet, enough sleep and physical activity, and the time and space to relax are the basic tools for coping with stress. Teenager's social, school and work lives can be stressful at times. So try to make your home a haven as much as possible. And do your best to model healthy stress awareness and management.

Maintain a positive relationship

Almost any positive influence you want to have on your teenager depends on a good relationship. Older teens spend less time with us and more time with their friends. They may also challenge our authority. This can make parent-child relationships more challenging. Try to grab small opportunities to spend time together as often as you can.

Build stress awareness

Talk about stress with your teen: What stresses you? What do they find stressful? What helps you cope and recover from stress? These conversations help build the stress awareness that will help young people learn to understand and manage their own stress. Listen more than talk. Be aware of the effort they've put into managing their stress.

Gently challenge negative thoughts

Sometimes, our negative thoughts can make our stress worse. So, if your teenager seems locked into negative thinking, look for ways to gently challenge their negative thoughts. Gently is the key word. You don't want to get into an argument about it. But you can show them a more hopeful way to look at a stressful situation. Role modelling positive thinking is also helpful.

Provide practical support

If your teen is facing a stressful time – exams, an unusually busy schedule, or some sort of crisis with school or friends – your TLC can help. Give them rides when they are pressed for time. Prepare their favourite meals. Temporarily reduce their home responsibilities or chores if they are extra busy. Small gestures of support can mean a lot.

Hear the concerns from your teen's perspective

As parents, we often want to rescue and protect teenagers, so we tell them what we think their problem is, and what they should do. But often the best thing to do is to pause and really try to listen. What are they feeling that tells them they are stressed? What are they worried about? Your non-judgmental listening and support helps them feel cared for and understood. It can also help teens understand their own stress and solutions that make sense to them.

Three ways to avoid increasing your teen's stress

1. Try not to lecture, raise your voice or criticize when your teenager seems stressed out. Instead, lower your voice, and speak in a neutral way that will help them calm down.
2. Don't be too quick to offer solutions to their problems. When teens are highly stressed, they won't really be able to hear your message. And insisting that they accept your solution may add to their stress.
3. Postpone discipline when your child is stressed out. Focus on calming upset feelings and not increasing stress. If a consequence or conversation about their behaviour is necessary, it can wait.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and psychologyfoundation.org.

Parenting Tip Sheet #3

Stress Management 101 for Parents

Want to help your teenager deal with stress and learn stress management strategies? A great way to start is to tune into and deal with your own stress.

Why?

- You'll be a better parent. We do most things better, including parenting, when we are not affected by excess stress.
- Your excess stress can affect your family. A 2010 online survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that 86 per cent of tweens and teens said they were bothered by their parents' stress.
- You teach by example. Kids learn from what we do even more than what we say. When you manage your stress effectively, your teenager learns valuable life lessons about stress management.

“How you deal with your own stress is linked to how you help teens, how they experience stress, and how they learn to cope with their stress.”

- Dr. Robin Alter, psychologist.

Keys to Managing your Stress

Awareness

An important first step in managing your stress is stress awareness.

- How do you know when you are overstressed? For example, is your body tense, are you irritable, anxious, or moody? Are you feeling overwhelmed, or do you often have trouble concentrating? Those are signs of stress.
- What kinds of situations, people or experiences are stressful for you?
- Which of these stressors affect you most often?

Dealing with stress

We have two main ways of managing stress: reducing stress and coping with stress.

Reducing Stress

When stress starts building up the ideal solution is to reduce the amount you are exposed to. Reducing your stress load:

- prevents your stress response system from working too hard
- leaves you with more mental and physical energy for other priorities
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Coping with Stress

Some kinds of stress cannot be reduced. However, we can still find ways to cope. Coping well means being able to tolerate stress when it's happening, and recovering – bouncing back – when the stressful situation is over.

Strategies for Reducing Stress

Problem-solve

Some stress is caused by problems that can be solved. Find the solution and your stress will be reduced.

Build knowledge and skills

Increasing our knowledge and skills can often help us deal with challenges more effectively and reduce the stress we experience in those situations. For example, starting a new job can be stressful, but getting trained in the skills you need can reduce that stress.

Reduce time spent in stressful situations

We can't avoid all stress, nor should we. Some stress occurs in situations and challenges that we cannot or should not avoid. But sometimes we spend more time than necessary in stressful situations or in the company of people who cause us stress.

Change your behaviour

When we can't avoid a stressful situation, we can sometimes change the way we behave in that situation in ways that reduce the stress we experience. For example, learning to stay calm and speak in a neutral voice when talking with our teenagers about discipline issues can make it less likely that they will respond in a hostile manner. That reduces the stress we feel and helps those conversations go more smoothly.

Create boundaries

Setting personal boundaries can often keep us from being caught up in situations that cause us stress, such as trying to do more things than we really have time for, trying to be perfect rather than good enough, or saying 'yes' when we should say 'no.'

Get organized

Being disorganized can be stressful. Work and commitments pile up. We miss appointments and opportunities. We waste energy because we're always a bit behind and trying to catch up.

Coping with stress

People have various positive ways of coping with stress. Some people listen to music, go for a run, or do yoga. Some people pray or meditate, and some reach out to friends and loved ones for support. Other coping strategies like using alcohol or drugs, overeating, or bingeing on screen time are less effective and can cause harm.

Here are five main categories of coping strategies that you might find helpful:

Change your thinking

Negative thoughts can cause or heighten negative emotions in a way that makes stress harder to cope with. Changing the way we think about our stress, and learning to challenge our negative thoughts, can improve our ability to cope.

Reach out for support

Getting support from other people is one of our most basic and important ways of coping with stress. Look for support from family members, friends, work colleagues and fellow members of support or activity groups.

Learn new coping strategies

Are the coping strategies you use right now working for you? Maybe you can learn new and better ones. You can find a wealth of information about positive coping strategies at www.stressstrategies.ca.

Make lifestyle changes

A healthy lifestyle – getting enough rest, exercise and nutrition, making time for the things you enjoy, and avoiding less healthy lifestyle choices – keeps your brain and body well equipped to help you cope with and recover from stress.

Seek professional help

Sometimes stress builds up to the point where we find we can't handle it ourselves. That's the time when seeking professional help is the best thing you can do to help yourself and your family.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and psychologyfoundation.org.