

Stress and Stress Reduction

The stress reactions below are presented in categories so that it may be more easily recognized and understood in children. There is no magic number of the symptoms that suggest difficulty in coping. Rather it is the extent to which the noted reaction is a change (different from a child's normal condition) that makes a reaction potentially important. Further, it is the combined presence of symptoms that determines the degree of the problem. Indicators may be isolated reactions or combinations among the three categories listed below. Finally, it is their duration (how long the symptoms have been present/how long they last), the frequency of such incidents (how often they happen) and the intensity (strength) with which they are present that suggests the severity of the difficulty in coping.

Indicators of Coping Difficulty in Children & Adolescents

Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
Apathy The "blahs" Recreation no longer pleasurable Sad	Withdrawal Social isolation School related withdrawal Reluctance to accept responsibilities Neglecting responsibilities	Preoccupation with illness (intolerant of/dwelling on minor ailments) Frequent illness (actually sick)
Anxiety Restless Agitated Insecure Feeling of worthlessness	Acting Out Alcohol/substance use Gambling/Spending spree Promiscuity Bullying Truancy	Physical exhaustion Immune system suppression
Irritability Overly sensitive Defensive Defiant/argumentative Insubordinate/hostile	Desperate Acting Out (getting attention-cry for help)	Bed wetting
Mental Fatigue Preoccupied Difficulty concentrating Inflexible	Administrative Infractions Tardy to school Poor appearance Poor personal hygiene Accident prone	Somatic (Body) Indicators Headache Insomnia Initial insomnia Recurrent awakening Early morning rising Change in Appetite Weight gain Weight loss (more serious) Indigestion Nausea Vomiting Diarrhea Constipation
	Legal Infractions Shoplifting Traffic tickets Fights	

Noticing that your child is demonstrating signs of stress and difficulty coping can be alarming. However, it is important to note that not all stress is considered “bad.” Examples of “good” stress could include preparing for an exam or the first day of school. This form of stress can enhance focus, energy, and motivation to boost performance. Acknowledging that stress is a natural part of life will normalize your child’s experience and their emotional, behavioral, and physical responses. If we were to encounter a dangerous situation, we would want our body to respond appropriately. Similar to anxiety, stress triggers the fight-flight-freeze response to protect us from perceived threats. For “good” stress the duration is usually short and subsides after the threat is no longer present. On the other hand, too much stress can lead to what is called chronic stress that persists long after the threat and can be influenced by more than one stressor.

Just like adults, children and adolescents manage stress in different ways. Introducing these exercises below in collaboration with Behavioral Health Services can help your child manage stress more effectively.

How to Help Your Child Practice Stress Reduction

Deep Breathing Exercise

1. Sit in a comfortable position.
2. Take 3 deep cleansing breaths.
3. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
4. Try to breathe so that only your stomach rises and falls.
 - a. As you inhale, concentrate on your chest remaining relatively still while your stomach rises. It may be helpful to imagine that your pants are too big, and you need to push your stomach out to hold them up.
 - b. When exhaling, allow your stomach to fall in and the air to fully escape.
5. Take some deep breaths, concentrating on only moving your stomach.
6. Return to regular breathing, continuing to breathe so that only your stomach moves. Focus on an easy, regular breathing pattern.

Note: It is normal for this healthy breathing to feel a little awkward at first. With practice, it will become more natural to you.

The CALM Reminder

Chest: Breathing slower and deeper

Arms: Shoulders sag

Legs: Loose and flexible

Mouth: Jaw drop

Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Cue-controlled relaxation is a very quick and easy relaxation technique. Set up a cue to remind you to relax.

1. There are two different types of cues (reminders):

External Cue (reminder) (e.g., when your watch alarm sounds; when you see a note on your desk; at traffic lights, etc.)

Internal Cue (reminder) (e.g., when your muscles reach a certain tension level, when you feel a headache coming on)

Note: It's very important that once you set up a cue, that you actually do the relaxation exercise when the cue comes up. Eventually it will become a healthy habit!

2. Relax by doing the following
 - a. Take a deep, easy breath
 - b. Exhale *s l o w l y*....
 - c. Say a word to yourself as you exhale (e.g., "relax" or "calm")
 - d. As you exhale, focus on letting your muscles relax. As an option (if it's convenient), you can close your eyes too

Disputation: Challenge Upsetting Thinking

Examine your child's thoughts for key words:

1. must, need, got to have to, should (unrealistic standards)
2. never, always, completely, totally, all everything, everyone (predictions / labeling)
3. awful, terrible, horrible, unbearable, disaster, worst ever (labeling / predictions)
4. jerk, slob, creep, hypocrite, bully, stupid (labels)

Questions your child could use to practice disputing upsetting thoughts

1. Am I upsetting myself unnecessarily? How can I see this another way?
2. Is my thinking working for or against me? How could I view this in a less upsetting way?
3. What am I demanding must happen? What do I *want* or *prefer*, rather than need?
4. Am I making something *too terrible*? Is it really that awful? What would be so terrible about that?
5. Am I *labeling* a person? What is the *action* that I don't like?
6. What's untrue about my thoughts? How can I stick to the *facts*? What's the proof for what I am thinking or believing about this?
7. Am I using extreme, black-and-white language? What less extreme words might be more accurate?
8. Am I fortune telling or mind reading in a way that gets me upset or unhappy? What are the *odds* (percent chance -- e.g., there is a 5% chance...) that it will really turn out the way I'm thinking or imagining?
9. What are my options in this situation? How would I like to respond?
10. Create more moderate, helpful, or realistic statements to replace the upsetting ones.
11. Have I had any experiences that show that this thought might not be completely true?

12. If my best friend or someone I loved had this thought, what would I tell them?
13. If my best friend or someone I loved knew I was thinking this thought, what would they say to me? What evidence would they point out to me that would suggest that my thought is not completely true?
14. Are there strengths in me or positives in the situation that I am ignoring? Am I underestimating my ability to cope with unfortunate circumstances?
15. When I am not feeling this way, do I think about this situation any differently? How?
16. Have I been in this type of situation before? What happened? What have I learned from prior experiences that could help me now?
17. Five years from now, if I look back on this situation, will I look at it any differently? Will I focus on any different part of my experience?
18. Am I blaming myself for something over which I do not have complete control?

Additional Resources, Apps & Books

Children

- **Right Now, I Am Fine** by Daniela Owen, *this book is a mindfully written self-help guide to aid children in dealing with stress and anxiety, by uncovering their emotions and following a simple calming routine.*
- **I Can Yell Louder** by Jennifer Gaither, *a great resource dealing with frustrated children, this book teaches that you don't have to yell and throw a tantrum to get what you want. We know how kids can get when they haven't left the house all day or are just plain angry about not getting what they want. This book will help your child understand how to communicate what they want in the proper way!*
- **Zen Pig: The Art of Gratitude** by Mark Brown, *Zen Pig might just be the cutest way to help your child learn how to focus their emotions when they are stressed out or anxious. Zen Pig teaches children the value of gratitude, mindfulness, and compassion in a way that's easy for them to understand.*
- **A Mother's Love** by Marilee Joy Mayfield, *the most important thing we can do for our children is let them know they are loved, especially when the world around them seems to be falling apart. The special bond a mother shares with her children is one of the most powerful forces of nature.*

Referenced from the Children's Book Association: <https://books.childrensbookassociation.com/books-that-got-kids-through-2020-12-10-20>

Adolescents

- **Anxiety Relief for Teens: Essential CBT Skills & Mindfulness Practices to Overcome Anxiety & Stress** by Regine Galanti, PhD, *is anxiety disrupting your life? With proven CBT-based skills and mindfulness techniques, this book can be your guide out of the spiraling stress of anxiety and get you back on track to living a happy and healthy life.*
- **Rewire Your Anxious Brain for Teens: Using CBT, Neuroscience, and Mindfulness to Help You End Anxiety, Panic, and Worry** by Debra Kissen, PhD, Ashley D. Kendall, PhD,

Michelle Lozano, LMFT, & Micah Ioffe, PhD, *it's time to retrain your brain! In this go-to guide for teens, four anxiety experts offer tangible tips and tools you can use every day to rewire your anxious brain; manage fears, stress, and worry; and get back to living your life.*

- **Mindfulness for Teens in 10 Minutes a Day: Exercises to Feel Calm, Stay Focused & Be Your Best Self** by Jennie Marie Battistin MA, LMFT, *calm your mind and find your best self with 10-minute mindfulness exercises for teens*

Parents

- **Why Smart Kids Worry: And What Parents Can Do to Help** by Allison Edwards, LPC
- **No-Drama Discipline: The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind** by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., & Tina Payne Bryson, PH.D.
- **Parenting the New Teen in the Age of Anxiety: A Complete Guide to Your Child's Stressed, Depressed, Expanded, Amazing Adolescence** by Dr. John Duffy
- **The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults** by Frances E. Jensen, MD with Amy Ellis Nutt

Websites & Apps

- behaviorchecker.org
- www.calm-kids.com / Calm Kids App
- Stop Breathe and Think App for Teens & Children
- Calm App
- Headspace App