

■ Just for Teens: A Personal Plan for Managing Stress

■ 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 also affects your mood and body. Many adults think that teens don't have stress because they don't have to work and support a family. They are missing the point and are wrong!

■ WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Stress comes from many different places.

- ▶ *From your parents.* "Don't disappoint me, clean up, hurry up, finish this, do your homework, go out for the team, practice your music, try out for the school play, do your best, stay out of trouble, make more friends, don't ever try drugs."
- ▶ *From your friends.* "How'd you do on the test, try this, prove you're not a loser, don't hang out with them, don't wear that."
- ▶ *Even from yourself.* "I need to lose weight, build my muscles, wear the right clothes, get better grades, score more goals, show my parents I'm not a kid anymore."

And from

- ▶ Watching parents argue
- ▶ Figuring out how to be independent
- ▶ Feeling pressure to get good grades
- ▶ Thinking about the future
- ▶ Being pressured to do something you know is bad for you, like smoking
- ▶ Not being good enough at sports
- ▶ Worrying about how your body's changing
- ▶ Dealing with sexual feelings
- ▶ 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 that travels through your blood to send messages 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 has 2 nervous systems. The voluntary system

does what you choose to have it do—walk, talk, move. The involuntary system keeps the body running without your even thinking about it—breathe, sweat, digest. The body actually has 2 different nerve pathways in the involuntary system. One works while we're relaxed, and the other works when there's an emergency. These 2 systems can't work together at the same time. It's important to know this because we can shut off the emergency system by flipping a switch and turning on the relaxed system.

■ IS STRESS ALWAYS BAD?

Even though stress is uncomfortable, it's not always a bad thing. Sometimes stress helps 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 lived in the jungle—where a tiger might leap out at any moment—the emergency nervous system was key to survival. Imagine your great, great, great ancestors, Sam and Zelda, munching on some berries. Suddenly they saw a tiger and had to *run!* Hormones gave them the burst of energy they needed to escape.

How did their bodies react? First, Sam and Zelda got that sinking feeling in their stomachs as the blood in their bellies quickly went to their legs so they could take off. When they jumped to their feet, their hearts beat faster to pump more blood. As they ran from the tiger, they breathed faster to take in 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 work it all out with the tiger.

Our ancestors never would have survived without the stress reaction, but stress helps us do more than run. It keeps us alert and prepared for the next lurking tiger.

Few of us need to outrun tigers today, but we all have problems and worries that turn on some of those exact same stress responses, like that panicky feeling you sometimes get when you're studying for a big test. Your heart beats fast. Your breathing becomes heavier. You sweat and get flashes of heat because your hormones are confused about why you aren't listening to them.

Why are you standing still when they are telling you to run?

■ IF STRESS IS A SURVIVAL TOOL, WHY DOES IT MAKE US FEEL AWFUL?

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). In their run for survival, Sam and Zelda used up every drop of their hormone burst and then took a well-deserved nap. In the modern world, our biggest worries aren't 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?"

It would be better if we had different hormones for different stresses. Hormones to deal with parental pressure would make you love chores. Hormones related to school stress would make you focus longer and shut down your kidneys so you wouldn't need bathroom breaks. But we only have those hormones that prepare us to flee or fight. So it's really important to use your brain to decide what's a real emergency and to use exercise to use up those hormone bursts.

Even when there are no real emergencies, our emotions make our bodies act like there is a huge crisis because the brain controls 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, and 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 treating it like one.

■ A REVIEW

- ▶ Stress is an important survival tool and can keep you alert and focused. But when you're not dealing with a real survival issue, it can make you uncomfortable and interfere with your ability to think through the problem.
- ▶ Stress hormones are telling us to run, so exercise uses them up.
- ▶ The body reacts to stress when the brain tells the body to prepare for an emergency.
- ▶ Emotions play an important role in how our bodies experience stress. How we think about a stressful situation and what we choose to do about it affects how it makes us feel.

■ HOW DO PEOPLE DEAL WITH STRESS?

Nobody can avoid all stress, but you can learn ways to deal with it. When you are stressed, it is normal to want to feel better. Anything that makes you feel better is called a *coping strategy*. Negative strategies can be quick fixes, but they're harmful because they can be dangerous and make stress worse in the long run. Think about some of the ways people cope with stress that can really hurt them.

- ▶ Drugs
- ▶ Cigarettes
- ▶ Alcohol
- ▶ Bullying
- ▶ Fighting
- ▶ Sex
- ▶ Cutting/self-mutilation
- ▶ Skipping school
- ▶ Eating disorders
- ▶ Running away
- ▶ Isolating themselves or withdrawal
- ▶ Gangs

■ DEALING WITH STRESS

These harmful choices may help you feel good for a little while, but some can be really dangerous. They also end up making people worried about you or angry with you. This messes up your life, and you become a lot more stressed. They're especially worrisome if they are a major way you deal with stress because you may turn to these behaviors more often during hard times. This is one of the ways addiction starts. If you are doing some of these things, ask yourself, "Why?" If it is to deal with problems, consider other ways of dealing with the same problems.

There are many healthy ways of coping. Healthy coping strategies are safe and can help you feel better without messing up your life.

■ CREATING YOUR PERSONAL STRESS-MANAGEMENT PLAN

Following is a 10-point plan to help you manage stress. All of these ideas can lower stress without doing any harm. None are quick fixes, but they will lead you toward a healthy and successful life. The plan is divided into 4 parts.

- 1) Tackling the problem
- 2) Taking care of my body
- 3) Dealing with emotions
- 4) Making the world better

When you read over the plan, you'll notice that you can come up with a bunch of ideas for each point. PLEASE don't think you should try them all. This plan is supposed to help you reduce stress, not give you more. Try out some ideas, then stick to 1 or 2 ideas for each point.

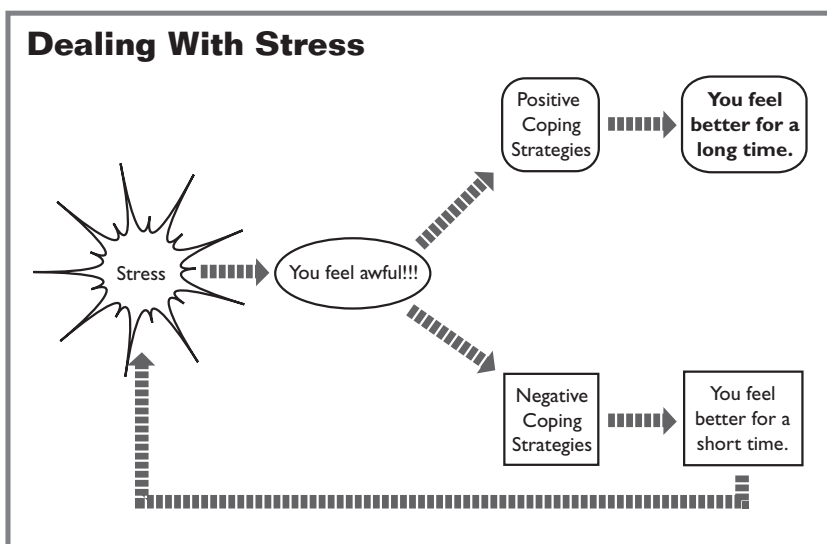
You might notice that this plan is almost like building a college or work résumé. This is the sane way to build a résumé; you are doing it to manage your life and remain happy and prepared for success, not to cram in activities to impress someone else. It will ensure you're healthy and balanced, and that's very attractive to colleges and employers.

■ PART 1: TACKLING THE PROBLEM

Point 1: Identify and Address the Problem.

First decide if a problem is a real tiger or just feels like one. If it can't physically hurt you, chances are that it can be better handled with clear thinking. This means turning off those thoughts that make you interpret the situation as a disaster.

- 1) A lot of people cope by ignoring problems. This doesn't make them go away; usually they just get worse.
- 2) People who cope by trying to fix problems tend to be emotionally healthier.
- 3) When it comes to studying or chores, it is best to get the work done first. Because work or studying produces stress, many people put it off and choose to do fun things first. The problem with that is they're not really having fun because they're worrying about the work they're ignoring. And of course, the longer they put it off, the more they worry. The cycle is endless.



- 4) Fights with parents and friends don't go away unless you deal with what upset you in the first place or unless everyone apologizes and decides to forgive each other.

Three ideas can help you manage a lot of work.

- 1) Break the work into small pieces. Then 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'll have less to worry about as you check off the things you have finished. You will look at the same huge amount of work and realize you can handle it.
- 3) Timelines can help with big projects.

Point 2: Avoid Stress When Possible.

Sometimes we know exactly when we are headed for trouble. Avoiding trouble from a distance is easier than dealing with it up close. You know the people who might be a bad influence on you, the places where you're likely to get in trouble, and 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 is nothing you can do to change a problem. 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 give tests, so just study instead of complaining about how unfair they are. You can't change the fact that your parents need to know where you go, so prove that you're responsible and deserve more freedoms. 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. Also learn when not to take things personally. You feel badly for no reason when you take something personally that really has little to do with you.

■ PART 2: TAKING CARE OF MY BODY

Point 4: The Power of Exercise

Exercise is the most important part of a plan to manage stress. When you are stressed, your body is saying, "Run!" So do it. Exercise every day to control stress and build a strong, healthy body. You may think you don't have time to exercise when you are most stressed, but that is exactly when you need it the most. If you are stressed about an assignment but too nervous to sit down and study—exercise! You will be able to think better after you have used up those stress hormones. Some people exercise before school because they can focus and learn better.

Point 5: Active Relaxation

You can flip the switch from being stressed to relaxed if you know how to fool your body. Because your body can only use the relaxed or emergency nervous system at any one time, you can turn on the relaxed system. You do this by doing the opposite of what your body does when it is stressed. Here are 2 ideas.

- 1) Breathe deeply and slowly. Try the 4–8 breathing technique. Lie on your back and place your hands on your belly with your fingers loose. Deep breaths first fill the belly, then the chest, then the mouth; the breath expands the belly and your hands pull gently apart. Take a full breath while counting to 4. Then hold that breath for about twice as long, or an 8 count. Slowly let it out to the count of 8, or even longer if you can. This will relax your body after a few breaths, but just as importantly, it requires your full concentration. Your mind is too focused on breathing to also focus on worries. Do this 10 times and you will feel much more relaxed. Yoga, martial arts, and meditation also teach great breathing skills. When you get good at this, you can even do this in a chair during a test and nobody will know.
- 2) Put your body in a relaxed position.
 - ▶ Your body knows when you're nervous. If you sit down to take a test and your legs are shaking, you are saying, "I want to run!" Remember, you can't concentrate and run at the same time, so you are making it harder to take the test. Instead, take those deep breaths, lean back, and tell your body there is no emergency.

- ▶ When you're angry, the natural thing to do is stand up and face someone shoulder-to-shoulder and chest-to-chest. You do this without even thinking, but this subconsciously tells the other person that you're angry and ready to fight. It also may prevent you from thinking clearly. Do the *opposite* of what you would do if you were really going to fight—sit down, take deep slow breaths, and tell your body there is no danger. Then use your brain to get out of the situation.

Point 6: Eat Well.

Everyone knows good nutrition makes you healthier. Only some people realize that it also keeps you alert through the day and your mood steady. People who eat mostly junk food have highs and lows in their energy level, which harms their ability to reduce stress. Instead of eating greasy or sugary foods, eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—they keep you focused for a longer time. Go to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov to learn more.

Point 7: Sleep Well.

Most kids don't get the sleep they need to grow and think clearly. Tired people can't learn as well and can be impatient and irritable. Here are some ideas to improve your sleep.

- ▶ Go to sleep about the same time every night.
- ▶ Exercise 4 to 6 hours before bedtime. Your body falls asleep most easily when it has cooled down. If you exercise right before bed, you will be overheated and won't sleep well. A hot shower 1 hour before bedtime also helps your body relax to fall asleep.
- ▶ Use your bed only to sleep. Don't solve your problems in bed. When you think about all the things that bother you, you have trouble falling asleep and wake up in the middle of the night to worry more. Instead, have another spot to think, like a *worry chair*. Give yourself plenty of time to think things through, make a list if you need to, and then *set it aside!* Go to bed to sleep.
- ▶ Don't do homework, watch television, read, or use the phone while in bed.

■ PART 3: DEALING WITH EMOTIONS

Point 8: Take Instant Vacations.

Sometimes the best way to de-stress is to take your mind away to a more relaxing place.

- 1) *Visualize.* Have a favorite place where you can imagine yourself relaxing. The place should be beautiful and calm. When you're stressed, sit down, lean back, take deep breaths, close your eyes, and imagine yourself in your calm place.
- 2) *Take time out for yourself.* Everyone deserves time for themselves—a bath or something that allows time to think and de-stress. Try a warm bath with your ears just underwater. Listen to yourself take deep, slow breaths. Take your pulse and count as your heart rate goes down.
- 3) Enjoy *hobbies* or creative art as an instant vacation.
- 4) Look at the beauty around you and get *pleasure from the small things* you may have stopped noticing.
- 5) Take *mini-vacations.* Sometimes we forget that the park around the corner is a great place to hang out. A walk outside can be a mini-vacation if you choose to forget your worries.
- 6) *Reading* a good book is an escape from reality. You have to imagine the sights, sounds, and smells—you are somewhere else for a while.

Point 9: Release Emotional Tension.

Sometimes feelings become so overwhelming that we cram them all away in an imaginary box and think we'll deal with them later. But later, there's so much stuff in the box that there is too much to deal with. This can make your head feel as if it is spinning. Sometimes you get angry or frustrated without even knowing why. You just know there is too much stuff going on in your head. It's good to pick just one problem to work on and forget the rest for the moment. When we decide to deal with only one problem at a time, it's much less scary to open the box.

Here are some ideas to release your thoughts or worries one at a time.

- ▶ **Creativity.** People who have a way to express themselves don't need to hold it inside. Creative outlets like art, music, poetry, singing, dance, and rap are powerful ways to let your feelings out.
- ▶ **Talking.** Every young person deserves a responsible adult to talk to and some friends to trust. Hopefully, you can talk to your parents. If you do not want to tell your parents everything, make sure to find an adult who'll listen and whom you can ask for advice.
- ▶ **Journaling.** Write it out!
- ▶ **Prayer.** Many young people find prayer or meditation helpful.
- ▶ **Laughing or crying.** Give yourself permission to feel your emotions fully.

■ PART 4: MAKING THE WORLD BETTER

Point 10: Contribute to the World.

Young people who work to make the world better have a sense of purpose, feel good about themselves, and handle their own problems better. It's important to understand that you really can make a difference in other people's lives. The role of teenagers is to recognize the mistakes adults have made and build a better world.

* * * *

Now that you have read about the kind of things a person can do to reduce stress, you may be ready to create a plan for yourself. Just check off the ideas you think would work best for you. There are spaces for you to write down your own ideas.

My Personal Stress Plan

■ PART 1: TACKLING THE PROBLEM

Point 1: Identify and Address the Problem.

When I have too many problems, I will work on just one at a time. For example, I am going to pick one huge problem and break it into smaller pieces.

- ▶ I will seek advice from family members and learn from their experience how to better handle problems.
- ▶ I will take big assignments and learn to make lists or timelines.
- ▶ I will work in teams so that I will learn that when people work well together they can do much more than if they each work alone.

Point 2: Avoid Stress When Possible.

I know that everyone has stress, but there are things that I could stay away from that really stress me out.

I will

- ▶ Avoid certain people, like _____
- ▶ Avoid certain places, like _____
- ▶ Avoid certain things, like _____
- ▶ Avoid certain memories that create pain for me, like _____

Point 3: Let Some Things Go.

I realize that I waste some of my energy worrying about things I can't fix. Here are some things that I will try to let go so I can focus on the problems I can change.

- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

I know I waste some of my energy when I take things personally that really have nothing to do with me. I am going to learn this lesson by remembering a time I did this and by choosing not to repeat that mistake.

■ PART 2: TAKING CARE OF MY BODY

Point 4: The Power of Exercise

I will do something that makes my body work hard for at least 20 minutes every other day—more is better. I know that strong bodies help people better deal with stress, and this will keep me in shape. The kinds of things I like to do include

- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

I can commit to _____ minutes of exercise a day. If I have trouble focusing in school, I will try exercising before school for _____ minutes (recommended minimum: 20) to see if it helps me concentrate better.

I know that a really hard physical workout will help me calm down when I am feeling most worried, stressed, or fearful. This is especially true when I can't concentrate on my homework because it feels like too much. The kinds of things I might do include

- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

Point 5: Active Relaxation

I will try to teach my body to relax by using

- ▶ Exercise that controls the body and releases tension like tai chi or boxing.
- ▶ Deep breathing.
- ▶ Yoga.
- ▶ Meditation.
- ▶ Warm, long baths or showers.

- ▶ Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is _____

Point 6: Eat Well.

I know that having a healthy body helps people deal with stress better. I have already agreed to exercise more. I understand that good nutrition also makes a difference in my health and how well I deal with stress. The changes I am ready to make include

- ▶ Eating a good breakfast
- ▶ Skipping fewer meals
- ▶ Drinking fewer sodas and sugary drinks
- ▶ Drinking more water
- ▶ Eating smaller portions
- ▶ Eating less greasy meals or snacks
- ▶ Eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods
- ▶ Going to www.ChooseMyPlate.gov to learn more
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

Point 7: Sleep Well.

I know that people who get a good night's sleep do a better job of dealing with stress and do better in school. For me to get the sleep I need, I will try to go to bed at ____:____.

I will consider the following plan to help me get the best night's rest:

- ▶ Avoid caffeine at least 6 hours before bed.
- ▶ Exercise 4 to 6 hours before bed.
- ▶ Finish homework after exercise because I will be my calmest, clearest, and most focused.
- ▶ Take some time to relax or hang out after homework.
- ▶ Shower or bathe 1 hour before bed.
- ▶ Begin to dim the lights 30 minutes before bed.
- ▶ Let go of my emotional tension before bed in a place other than bed (see point 9). If I am really troubled, I will do this earlier in the evening.
- ▶ I will use my bed only for sleeping. I will use another place to do some of the things I do in bed now. I will
 - Stop reading in bed.
 - Stop doing homework in bed.
 - Stop watching television in bed.
 - Stop talking to my friends or instant messaging in bed.
 - Stop worrying in bed.
- ▶ Dock my cell phone in a charger that is not in my bedroom.
- ▶ Deal with the things that stress me out by having a time to let go of my thoughts and feelings in a place other than my bed.

■ **PART 3: DEALING WITH EMOTIONS**

Point 8: Take Instant Vacations.

Everyone needs to be able to escape problems for a while by taking an instant vacation. I will

- ▶ Read a book.
- ▶ Take a mini-vacation to a local park or recreation center.
- ▶ Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is _____

- ▶ Watch television.
- ▶ Listen to music.
- ▶ Play video games that are not violent or stressful.
- ▶ Take a warm bath.
- ▶ _____

Point 9: Release Emotional Tension.

I will try to let my worries go, rather than letting them build up inside.

- ▶ I will talk to a friend I have chosen wisely because I know he or she will give good advice.
- ▶ I will talk to my
 - Mother
 - Father
 - Teacher
 - _____
- ▶ I will ask my parents or a teacher to help me find a counselor to help me work out my problems.
- ▶ I will pray to gain strength.
- ▶ I will meditate.
- ▶ I will write out my thoughts in a diary, journal, or blog.
- ▶ I will let myself laugh more.
- ▶ I will let myself cry more.
- ▶ I will make lists to get organized.
- ▶ When it seems that I have too many problems and they seem like more than I can handle, I will work on one at a time.
- ▶ I will express myself through
 - Art
 - Music
 - Creative writing
 - Poetry
 - Rap
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

■ **PART 4: MAKING THE WORLD BETTER**

Point 10: Contribute to the World.

I know that people who realize they are needed feel better about themselves because they can make a difference in other people’s lives. I plan to

- ▶ Help a member of my family by _____
- ▶ Volunteer in my community by _____
- ▶ Help the environment (or animals) by _____

■ **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 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. Nobody will solve your problems; they might just help you figure out how to better deal with them. *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.
- ▶ You are using unhealthy coping strategies and are having trouble replacing them with healthier ones.

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

Adapted from Ginsburg KR, Jablow MM. Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings. 2nd ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2011

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