

A Parent's Guide to Helping Teens Understand and Cope with Stress

By Jen Tramer

Do you romanticize your teen years with memories of hanging out with friends, dancing at homecoming, and participating on a winning sports team? Or do you remember the gory details of every breakup, every failed test, and every bad hair day?

Whether your memory is reality or revisionism, somewhere you must remember the feeling of stress. Your teens are now confronting this stress.

"My daughter was just finishing her sophomore year of high school and final exams were just around the corner," says Jane Rice of New Hampshire. "At the same time, she insisted on completing her driving school classes while participating in track that spring. One slight from her friend was enough to put her over the edge," says Jane.

"It was not hard to diagnose my daughter's stress, but alleviating it was another matter all together."

A Definition

The American Academy of Pediatrics defines [stress](#) for teenagers as, "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."

Stress is the body's way of protecting itself from emotional and physical pressure and danger.

Dr. Kimberly Bell, clinical psychologist at Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Ohio, believes that "our memory of our teenage years may seem less stressful in retrospect. As adults, we face life with more emotional resources. Teenagers are confronted with many challenges that push the limits of their cognitive and psychological strengths. Stress is a personal and subjective experience."

Limited stress can be positive, motivating a person to do well. But too much stress can be debilitating to one's body and mind.

Why are teenagers stressed, how do parents know when the stress level is too high, and what can parents do to guide their teenagers who are stressed?

Causes of Stress:

Simply being a teen is stressful. Regardless of the number

of commitments, teens often feel too much is asked of them.

Some teens seem to do it all: they work hard in school, volunteer, and participate in extracurricular activities. Even as you marvel at their capacity to keep so many balls in the air, you also know that they can feel overwhelmed. Sometimes they are simply stressed out.

Teens are constantly dealing with demands from school, extracurricular activities, parental expectations, social pressures, time constraints, negative self-image and changes in their bodies. Occasionally, more serious situations are part of the mix, such as family conflict, [divorce](#), death of a loved one, an unsafe living environment, family financial worries and worries about the future.

Recognizing Stress:

Parents should learn to recognize stress in their teens.

While people respond differently to stress, there are some common signs:

- Headaches
- Irritability
- Sleep issues like insomnia or fatigue
- Trouble concentrating
- Nausea

For the most part, stress is a healthy response to challenge.

It's your body's way of heightening focus, strength and stamina. When properly managed, stress enhances a person's ability to perform quickly and effectively under pressure. However, when a person has not developed successful coping mechanisms to ongoing stressors, such as being bullied, dealing with divorce, or juggling too many activities, the body begins to respond through physical symptoms like those listed above.

Esme, a mature and independent 14-year-old from Ohio, has learned to recognize her own stress. "Over the years," she says, "I have learned that when I start to feel mad and frustrated, I am stressed out." She attributes this to stressful social situations, excessive schoolwork, or simply too much going on in her life.

It's not just the super achievers who feel stress. A father of a 14-year-old boy reports that when his son feels too much pressure, he simply quits trying. The frustration felt by both the teenager and his father is palpable.

Tips to Help Teens Relieve Stress:

A teen's capacity to deal with stress ranges from creating a detailed plan to alleviate stress to absolute inertia and

everything in between.

Esme has found a way to manage her stress. "I've learned to stop what I'm doing, and [do some sort or exercise](#).

Practicing yoga or going for a walk helps me feel better."

But if a teen can't figure out what to do, parents can and should help them. Parents can [help their teens work through their stress](#) by sharing the following tips:

1. Set priorities.

Decide what needs to be done first. Learn how to break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks.

2. Set realistic goals.

Setting your sights too high is setting yourself up for stress if you can't realistically achieve them.

3. Acknowledge your feelings.

It is normal to feel overwhelmed when there is a lot to do. If you are feeling especially stressed or depressed, let someone know and try to figure out a way to cut down on some of your activities until you feel better.

4. Realize you don't need to be perfect.

Learn to feel good about doing a competent or “good enough” job rather than always demanding perfection. You don’t always have to be an [overachiever](#).

5. Take a break.

If you find yourself in a stressful situation, remove yourself from it. Listen to music, talk to a friend, draw, write or watch a movie.

6. Get strength from your friends.

Build a network of friends who help you cope in a positive way. Avoid negative ways of responding, such as using alcohol or tobacco.

7. Help someone else.

Share your talents by helping someone else. This will make both of you feel great.

8. Try something small.

Recognize that sometimes making little changes in your life can really add up to big feelings of relief.

9. Be mindful.

Learn stress management skills, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and positive self-talk.

10. Love yourself.

Learn to accept yourself as you are. Identify your unique qualities and strengths. Learn to build on these strengths but always remember that no one is perfect.

11. Practice self-care.

Last, but certainly not least, take care of yourself. A combination of a healthy diet, regular exercise and plenty of sleep helps relieve stress.

Outside Help

In some cases, stressed teenagers who have [tried hard to deal with their stress](#) may still feel helpless. When teens feel they can't turn things around or feel like giving up, there may be danger. In this situation, it might be wise to have them talk to a professional who can help them sort out their feelings and get their life back in working order.

Dr. Bell recommends that parents present professional help in a positive light in order to decrease the negative stigma associated with seeking help. "Do not present professional help as a last ditch effort after the parent no longer knows

how to help. Present psychotherapy as a way that people can work through internal thoughts and feelings with an objective person who is outside of the situation," advises Bell.

How Parents Can Help Stressed Teens

Along with helping teens recognize and deal with their stress, parents can play additional roles. By using healthy stress management techniques, parents can serve as positive role models for their teens.

1. Model self-care.

Taking care of yourself, monitoring your own stress levels and living a balanced life impacts how your teen manages his or her own life. On the flip side, if your teen watches you take a drink of alcohol or smoke a cigarette every time you are overwhelmed, they are more likely to imitate that behavior.

According to Dr. Bell, "How you respond to stress—your own and your teen's—can significantly affect how well your child will manage. Getting excited and worked up when your teen is acting out exacerbates the situation, and things are likely to get out of hand. When a stressed-out teenager is met with a calm, confident, soothing parent, he or she can borrow that strength and begin to calm down. This can be

difficult for parents who are dealing with their own stress, but a parent that has good coping skills will find that they have the resources to loan out to a struggling teenager."

2. Support your teen's decisions.

Allowing your teenager to make decisions and then supporting those decisions or being understanding of them even if they don't work out will most likely open the door for future conversations. This might also give you an opportunity to share your own opinions and advice. Stay involved but don't interfere.

Jane from New Hampshire did just that. "I let my daughter work through the challenges of her sophomore year, while being around as a sounding board. She could have done better on her final exams that year, but she survived and she has made a commitment not to spread herself too thin next semester."

Our teens will make mistakes just as we did when we were their age. If we constantly try to help our stressed teenagers avoid mistakes, they will miss out on valuable life lessons that will help them grow and acquire the tools needed to live in the world.

3. Just listen.

Listening to your teenager is as important as ever. Sometimes, simply allowing your teen to talk without interrupting them is enough to help them feel better.

4. Keep a routine.

Whenever possible, stick to the rituals and traditions that your family enjoys. This will bring stability to your teens when other aspects of their life might feel out of control. Final recommendation: Don't forget to laugh and find humor in life, as this can be the best stress reliever of all.