



CHALLENGE



November 2006

A Herff Jones IMPACT Resource for Students

Taming the Stress Monster

You wake up to thoughts buzzing around your head of all the things that need to be done. You grab a donut on the way out the door to a meeting before school to select decorations for the upcoming Winter Ball. You bounce from class to class and cram in a little last-minute studying at lunch for a test in history you forgot about. After school

you have basketball practice, and when you get home your parents complain they never see you. Your list of things to do never seems to get any

shorter, but you don't want to drop out of anything because you want to look good on your college applications.

If this description bears any resemblance to your life, you're not alone! In a study of more than 8,000 high school students and people in their early 20s, close to two-thirds of all subjects polled reported feeling stressed at least once a week, according to researchers at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The study also found that one third of U.S. teens say

they feel stressed-out on a daily basis.

What's causing all the stress? Common sources include:

- A fight with a friend or sibling
- Taking a test
- Having a big project due
- Not having enough money
- Disagreements with teachers
- Relationships with peers



- Separation or divorce of parents
- Changing schools
- Taking on too many activities
- Having too high expectations

- Family financial problems
- Death of a loved one
- Birth of a brother or sister
- Family responsibilities
- Being bullied or exposed to violence or injury.

Signs of Stress

Stress in and of itself is not a bad thing. When it is part of a natural reaction to challenge or danger, stress can be positive. For example, feeling a bit of stress about an upcoming test can help you get ready to do

your best on it. But negative stress occurs when you feel out of control or under intense pressure—stressed out.

How do you know if you're stressed out? People who are experiencing stress overload may notice some of the following signs:

- A feeling of being constantly hurried or pressured
- Memory problems
- Lack of concentration
- Angry outbursts
- Problems sleeping
- Fatigue
- Irritability and moodiness
- Getting more colds, flu, infections
- Stomach aches or tension headaches
- Sadness or depression
- Anxiety or panic attacks.

Keeping Stress Under Control

Except for major catastrophes, few events are stressful in themselves. Negative stress often results from situations you feel are threatening or hard to handle. In other words, it's often the way we perceive an event that causes negative stress. For example, if your parents tell you that your family is moving to another state, that

could cause stress because it is a change. If you are looking forward to the move, it would be considered positive stress. If you are anxious about moving and fitting in at a new school, then it would be negative stress. By focusing on negative possibilities and anticipating that things will go wrong, you add stress to your life.

Experiencing too much stress can have a negative impact on physical and mental health. It's best to learn how to manage the stress that comes with any new challenge—good or bad. Regular use of stress-management skills can help keep stress from building to an uncomfortable level and can really help you get through challenging circumstances. Try some of the following techniques to help keep stress under control.

- **Avoid overscheduling.** Yes, you want to look good on your college applications, but serious involvement in a few well-selected activities is more meaningful than shallow participation in a multitude of things. Be selective about what you get involved in.
- **Prioritize.** When your “to do” list gets long, realize that you aren't going to get it all done at once. Decide what's most important and tackle it. Mentally let the rest go until you can finish the most important task.
- **Be realistic.** No one's perfect, so don't set unreasonable expectations for yourself. Learn to feel good about doing a competent job rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others.
- **Learn to say no.** When you know you can't comply with others' requests without feeling overwhelmed, it's okay to just say no.
- **Watch your thoughts.** Many people don't pay much attention to how they “talk” to themselves, but the language we use can have a big impact on how we see things. You can use your self-talk to decrease stress. Catch your negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. For example, “I'll never get this research paper done and turned in on time” is the kind of thinking that builds stress. Stress busting thinking would be something like “This is a big job, but if I stay focused and break it down into manageable steps, I will make steady progress.” Instead of “I'm so klutzy,” when you trip in front of a group of your peers, think “It's not like me to be so klutzy.”
- **Treat your body well.** Get some exercise, get a good night's sleep, drink lots of water, and eat healthy foods. Keeping your body in good working order will help you meet the demands of life.
- **Take a break.** When you feel stress starting to build, go for a walk, watch a movie, read a book, take a hot shower—do something relaxing that will allow you to come back refreshed and ready to take things on again.

Build Your Resilience

Ever notice that certain people seem to adapt quickly to stressful circumstances and take things in stride? They're cool under pressure and able to handle problems as they come up. Researchers have identified the qualities that make some people seem naturally resilient even when faced with high levels of stress. If you want to build your resilience, work on developing these attitudes and behaviors:

- Think of change as a challenging and normal part of life.
- See setbacks and problems as temporary and solvable.
- Believe that you will succeed if you keep working toward your goals.
- Take action to solve problems that crop up.
- Build strong relationships and keep commitments to family and friends; ask for help.
- Participate regularly in activities for relaxation and fun.

Learn to think of challenges as opportunities and stressors as temporary problems, not disasters. Practice solving problems and asking others for help and guidance rather than complaining and letting stress build. Make goals and keep track of your progress. Make time for relaxation. Be optimistic. Believe in yourself. Be sure to breathe. And let a little stress motivate you into positive action to reach your goals.

Source: www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/stress.html