



Coping with Anxiety at Home



Stress is often called the silent killer. The physical and emotional toll that undiluted stress can have on a person's body has been studied and well documented by both mental health professionals and physicians. If you ever need a good example of this, Google before-and-after photos of presidents. Note what they looked like entering the office and what they look like after their first term.

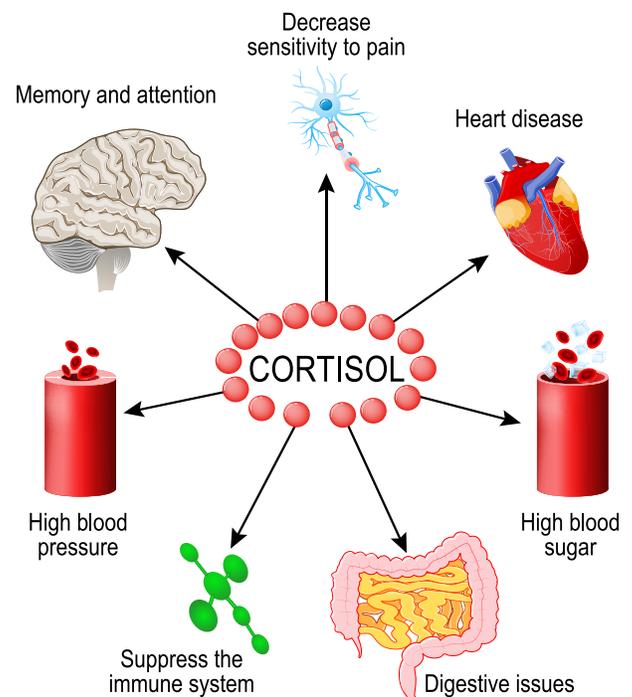
The reason stress is so harmful when it is unregulated is because stress causes your body to release hormones as though it's under attack. Your muscles clench, your heart rate increases, and your system becomes flooded with adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones affect your ability to sleep, which affects your ability to think clearly.

In other words, unregulated stress takes a terrible toll on our bodies.

When our bodies detect something like a threat, we have what is called a "stress response." There are lots of different kinds of stress responses going on in our bodies all the time. For example, feeling hungry is a stress response, or feeling dizzy.

However, the type of stress response we have when we feel a threat or extreme anxiety is the "fight, flight, or freeze" response. This particular response is built into our brains and is a huge reason human beings have survived as long as we have.

Imagine this: you're out backpacking through the beautiful forests of Idaho on a lovely fall day. The birds are chirping and the temperature is just right, and then you turn the corner and see—to your horror—a bear. Your heart rate immediately goes up and your body is flushed with hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Your prefrontal cortex shuts down completely and your body prepares to get the heck out of there as quickly as it can.





This stress response will help keep you alive . . . if you're in the woods and there is actually a bear.

But what happens to the human body when this sort of stress response is repeatedly activated? Our brains are designed to detect patterns in the world around us. The more often you have a fight-or-flight stress response, the more likely you are to have it again.

Soon you will find your muscles are sore and you're having trouble sleeping. You might notice an uptick in agitation or anxiety. That is because your brain is now on constant alert for possible threats. This kind of response can wear out your body quickly.

However, it is important to understand that not all stress is bad stress. The stress response you have when your body is hungry, for example, is your body's way of alerting you of a need that it has.

There are three kinds of stress:

Positive Stress. Positive stress is the kind of stress that makes us perform at our peak. These are the nervous jitters we get before a job interview or on our first day at a new position. Positive stress is stress that can be regulated and does not cause mental anxiety to the level that causes our bodies to prepare for battle.

Neutral stress. Neutral stresses are things that are uncommon and can be difficult. This can include the loss of a loved one or experiencing something like a car accident. These are the kinds of stresses that we need a community around us to help cope with. Neutral stresses can be the foundation for long-term resilience.

Toxic stress. Toxic stress is continual, unregulated stress. This is the kind of stress that triggers a fight-or-flight stress response regularly and trains the brain to be on constant alert. This kind of stress creates depression, anxiety, agitation, and poor judgment.



Kids and Stress

Stress is difficult for adults to manage. For children, stress can be devastating.

Unregulated, toxic stress for children impacts the way their brains and bodies develop and can have long-term implications on their ability to make good decisions, have healthy relationships, and have appropriate responses to social situations.

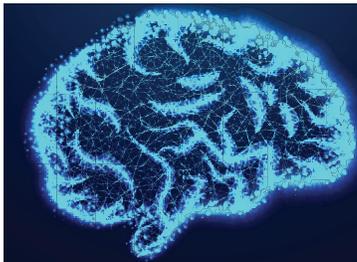
While toxic stress can be a side effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as household dysfunction, abuse, or neglect, toxic stress can also come from external situations such as bullying at school, worry about parents' well-being, or the COVID-19 pandemic.

When children and adolescents begin to experience the physical symptoms of stress, it has an even more adverse reaction on their bodies than it does for adults.

There are two reasons for this.

First, children lack the experience to regulate their emotions and give themselves perspective. This very important skill allows a person to recognize the stress and manage it in healthy ways, but children and adolescents often lack the life experience needed to utilize such skills to help them cope with stress.

The second reason is that during childhood adolescence, the human brain goes through several stages of development. Particularly in adolescence, when the prefrontal cortex is changing shape, teens struggle to recognize that the moment they are in will not last forever. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that controls executive functions, such as:

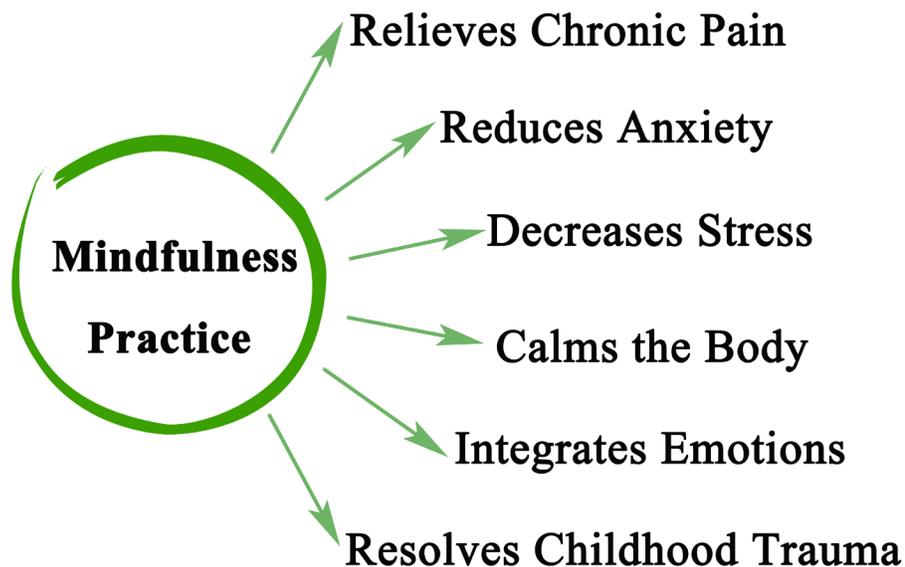


- Focusing one's attention
- Predicting the consequences of one's actions
- Impulse control and managing emotions
- Anticipating events in the environment
- Planning for the future

The prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until around the age of 25. This means that children and teenagers lack the development to manage and control their emotions and anticipate their environment. For this reason, stress takes a particularly harsh toll on young people.

What can parents do to help their teenagers cope with stress?

The good news is that parents can take an active role in helping their kids cope with stress and stressful situations in healthy ways. Among many the things the expert therapists at Idaho Youth Ranch do to help kids and families nurture hope, healing, and resilience is teach kids and families how to regulate their emotions and manage stress.



In the following pages, you will find simple exercises that you can do at home with kids of most ages to manage their stress and regulate their emotions. These exercises are designed to increase mindfulness, which has been shown with mounting scientific evidence to help reduce stress.

People who practice mindfulness often become more aware of their thoughts, don't react to a situation immediately, regulate their emotions, listen to their bodies, and become more attuned to the emotions of other people.

In addition , mindfulness has the following positive effects:

- Reduces activity in the part of your brain that controls your stress response (the amygdala)
- Improves focus
- Changes your attitude toward stress

These exercises are meant to be a support tool for kids and families. If your child is exhibiting dangerous behaviors—including self-harm, talking about suicide, acting out violently, or signs of depression or anxiety—you should reach out to a professional for help.

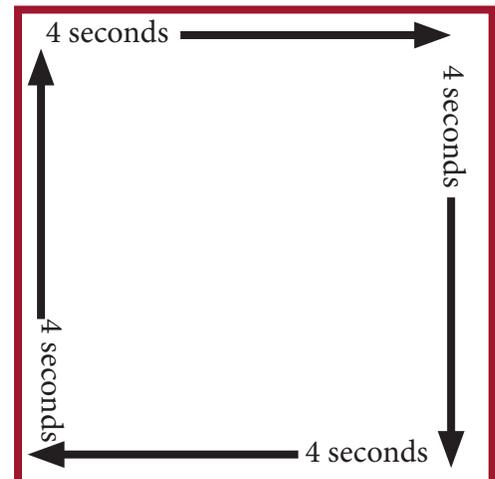
EXERCISE: Square Breathing



Square breathing is a guided breathing exercise that helps slow the heart rate and calm the mind.

Parents can teach this skill to children at any age and can model it during times of frustration. Building a foundation for mindful breathing will help kids as they grow. Deep breathing combats the side effects of stress by calming down the mind, heart, and body.

1. Take a breath in to the count of four. (You can choose to make this to a count of any number that works for you.)
2. Hold the breath for another count of four.
3. Exhale to another count of four.
4. Hold to a count of four.
5. Repeat as many times as you need to feel calm.



EXERCISE: Resilience Walks

When done correctly, taking a walk is a great way to increase mindfulness.

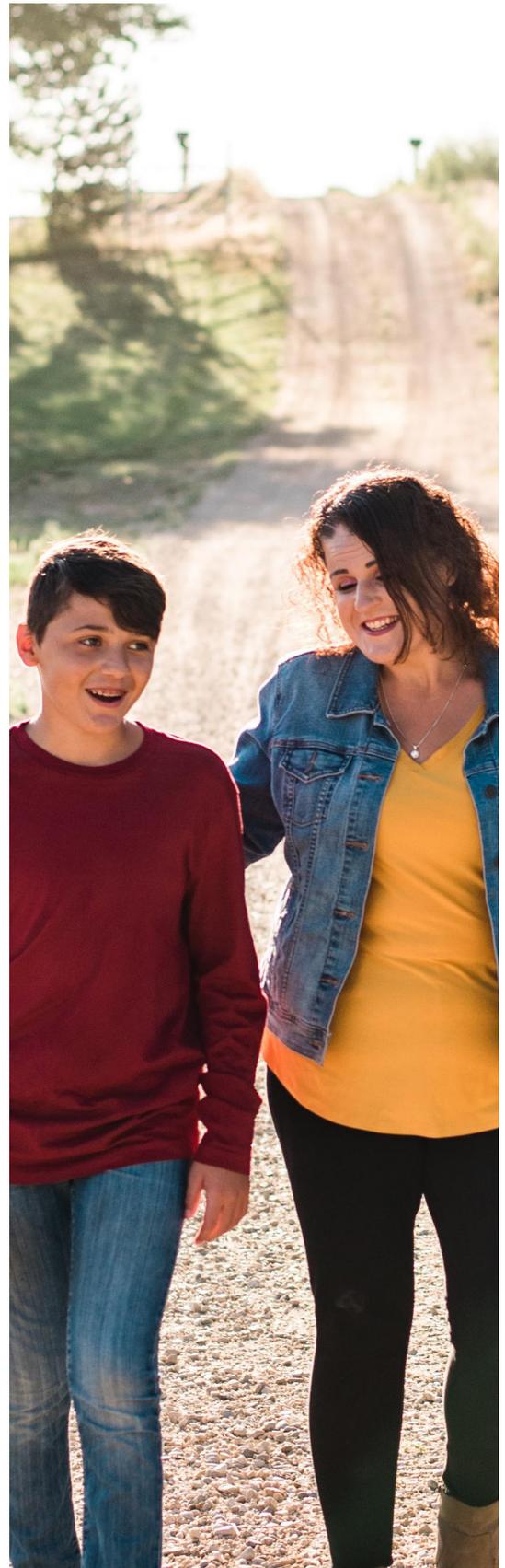
Parents who notice their kids struggling can invite them to take mindfulness walks. Along the way, encourage your kids to use all five senses through gentle questions or simple observations.

The goal here is not to be instructive, but rather to help be open to the experience of walking. Try pointing out things:

- “How does the wind feel?”
- “What can you smell on the air?”
- “What things do you see that make you joyful or curious?”
- “If you close your eyes, what sounds do you hear?”

You can even bring along a snack to trigger their sense of taste.

Resilience walks focused on all five senses help calm the mind by bringing awareness only to the body in the present moment. A mindfulness walk or a resilience walk will help bring young people into the present moment and allow their minds to calm. Doing so allows them to “step back” from their stress or anxiety so they can healthily process their emotions.



EXERCISE: Body Checks



One of the most common side effects of stress is tense or clenched muscles. A good exercise for someone experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety is to do a “body clench” check.

1. Lie down on a flat, comfortable surface such as a couch or bed.
2. Clench all the muscles in your body as tightly as you can. This includes curling your toes, squeezing your hands into fists, clenching your legs tightly together, and tightening your abdominal muscles.
3. Take long, even breaths by slowly breathing in through your nose and exhaling out through your mouth.
4. Starting at your toes and working your way up, start to release muscles with each exhale. For example, on your first exhale, completely relax your toes. On the next, completely relax one calf, then the other.
5. Slowly and systematically work your way up your body until you have released all of your muscles.

By doing a body clench check, you will become aware of all of the tightness sitting in your muscles that you did not realize you were carrying around. You will also slowly relax each muscle group with mindfulness so you can relax the stress on your body and calm the mind. This is a great exercise that young people and adults can use at night before bed, for example, to release the stress or anxiety of the day and to calm their minds before going to sleep.



EXERCISE:

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Grounding Technique



This proven method will help you calm your mind and bring your focus back to your body. This method is effective with kids and adults of any age and will help regulate the stress response in the body. It is focused on the five senses.

Start by focusing on five things you can see, and say them quietly out loud to yourself. For example:

- I see a door; it has a silver handle.
- I see a photo; it is a picture of my brother.
- I see the curtains; they have flowers on them.
- I see a light switch with three switches.
- I see a black cat.

Then, focus on four things you can feel:

- I feel a soft blanket.
- I feel soreness in my legs.
- I feel my socks.
- I feel my watch on my wrist.

Third is sound. List three things you can hear:

- I hear a truck going by.
- I hear the dishwasher running.
- I hear a door closing.

Now, two smells:

- I smell my lotion or shampoo
- I smell the fabric softener in the clothes I'm wearing

Finally, what is one thing you can taste?

- I can still taste the sandwich I ate for lunch.

By focusing on sensory information, you can help your mind calm down by concentrating on something tangible rather than spiraling out of control about the things that give you anxiety.

EXERCISE: Visualization

There is an old expression, “When you name it, you tame it.”

Often the things creating anxiety for us are simply things that are outside of our control, and the feeling of helplessness results in high levels of stress and generalized anxiety. This can result in an inability to “shut your mind off” and get the rest you need to recover from the day. Anxiety tends to build on itself, and too much anxiety makes it hard to sleep. When you don’t get enough sleep, you can’t process information as well, and thus you become more anxious.



Visualization can be a powerful tool for letting your anxiety go.

The Empty Theater

Try lying down in a comfortable place. Now imagine you’re sitting in a theater. Imagine what the theater looks like around you. What color are the seats? Where in the theater are you?

Now, imagine the theater is filled with the people who are causing you stress or anxiety. Picture each of them one at a time and concentrate on why they are there. How many are there? Where are they sitting? Are the people who create the most stress close or far away?

Up on the screen in your imaginary theater, let the memories from the day play like a movie and ask how each scene made you feel. Were you angry or scared? Overwhelmed or frustrated? Why?

Now, while taking long, deep breaths, pick one person in the theater that you want to leave. Imagine them also taking the stress and negative feelings you have associated with them, so you’re not carrying those emotions anymore. Breathe in deep as they stand up, and then slowly exhale as you imagine them walking out of your theater.

Repeat this process, letting each person leave one by one until you are alone in the theater. Focus on your breathing for the entire time.

Then, still taking long, deep breaths, allow the scenes on your theater screen to start fading away, letting go of the feelings you associate with them until you are alone in a peaceful, quiet place in your mind.

In this exercise, the theater represents your state of mind, and by letting each person and scene go, you can ease your mind into releasing the anxiety.

EXERCISE: Wave Breathing



Start by finding a comfortable sitting position and closing your eyes or turning your gaze downward.

1. Begin to breathe comfortably and deeply; keep the rhythm of your breathing natural and relaxed. Once here, picture yourself on a beach.
2. As you breathe in, imagine a gentle wave reaching the shore.
3. As you breathe out, imagine that same gentle wave flowing back into the water.

Continue this deep, relaxed breathing. On each inhale, imagine another gentle wave reaching the shore; on each exhale, imagine that same wave flowing back into the water.

As you continue slowly breathing, keep visualizing your breath as continuously moving waves. You might imagine exactly what the waves look like. What color is the water? How far up the shore do the waves come? Are the waves smooth or frothy? You could also imagine the sound the waves make as they flow in and out from the shore. Is the sound very quiet or more noticeable? How do the waves sound different when they are coming in as compared to how they sound when they are going out?

Another helpful exercise using waves is to say to yourself, as you breathe in and imagine the wave coming in, “I am.” Then, as you breathe out and imagine the wave returning to the water, say, “Completely relaxed.” (This is called “statement breathing.”)



EXERCISE:

Gratitude Practice/Open Heart



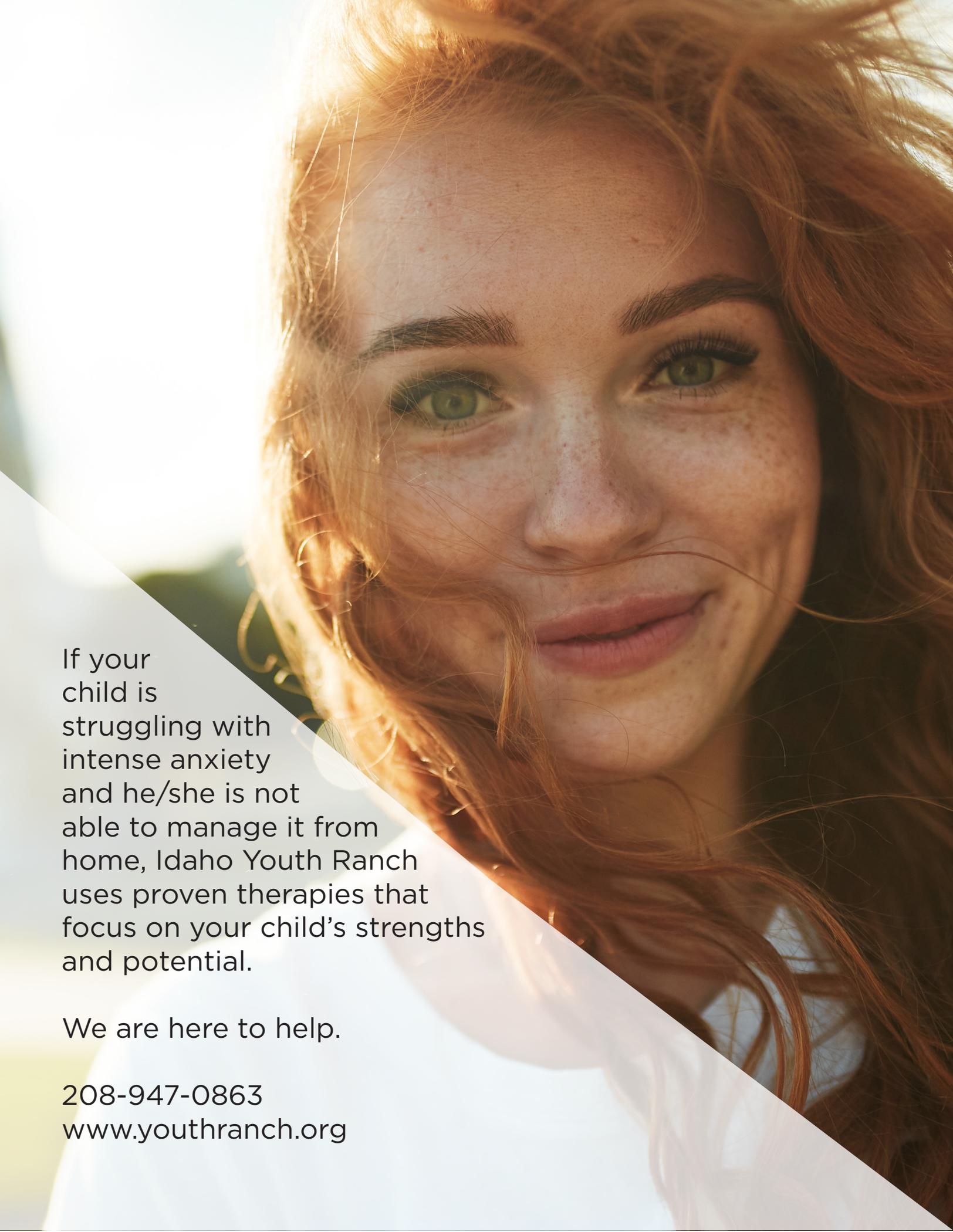
This is a quick exercise you can do at home. Establish a gratitude ritual by thinking of three things you are thankful for in the morning and three things you are thankful for at night when brushing your teeth. Alternatively, you could start a gratitude journal and write down three things each day that you are grateful for.



Open Heart

Start by standing up, with your legs and arms relaxed. Do not lock your knees. Allow yourself to breathe normally.

1. On the inhale, put both of your arms straight out in front of you at shoulder level.
2. Keeping them at shoulder level, gradually move your arms toward your back and exhale slowly. Resist the urge to hold your breath.
3. As you move your arms toward your back, notice the gentle stretch of your chest.
4. Gently clasp your arms behind your back and exhale.
5. With your arms behind you, breathe normally for 10–30 seconds based on your level of comfort. Enjoy the stretch of your chest as you greet the day.



If your child is struggling with intense anxiety and he/she is not able to manage it from home, Idaho Youth Ranch uses proven therapies that focus on your child's strengths and potential.

We are here to help.

208-947-0863
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