



## Understanding Teen Stress

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. We all experience it in various ways and situations. However, stress looks different in adolescents and teens compared to adults. As a parent, it's important to understand what causes stress in teenagers, how it affects them, and what you can do to help them manage it in a healthy way.



CBT can significantly enhance your child's mental health journey. Let's discover how.

### What is Stress?

Stress is the body's response to any demand or pressure. When we're stressed, our body goes into "fight or flight" mode, releasing hormones like adrenaline and cortisol to help us respond to perceived threats or challenges.

In small doses, stress can be helpful and motivate us to take action. But chronic or excessive stress takes a toll on both physical and mental health. Common effects of chronic stress include:

- Anxiety, depression, anger
- Headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension
- Changes in appetite and sleep habits
- Decreased energy and concentration
- Weakened immune system

For teens, stress effects can be magnified due to hormonal changes during puberty and ongoing brain development.

## Why Teens Experience More Stress

There are several reasons why teens today report much higher stress levels compared to previous generations:

- Greater academic pressure: Getting good grades and test scores is seen as crucial for college admissions and future success. Many teens feel overwhelmed trying to juggle schoolwork, extracurriculars, and testing. Perfectionism and pressure from parents can heighten stress even more.
- Social media usage: Social media exposes teens to an endless stream of images and information ripe for social comparison. Cyberbullying and fear of missing out (FOMO) also contribute to anxiety and depression.
- Fewer coping skills: Teens have not yet built up the life experience and coping mechanisms that adults utilize to handle stress. They're also still developing emotionally and cognitively.
- More adult responsibilities: Many teens work part-time jobs on top of school demands. Older teens may take care of siblings or aging family members as well. These adult roles lead to mental exhaustion.
- Physical changes: Puberty and brain development during the adolescent years also play a role. The flood of hormones can make teens feel out of control of their own emotions and moods at times.
- Greater susceptibility: Research shows the teenage brain is more vulnerable to stress. The regions governing emotion are already overactive during puberty. Chronic stress can then overly sensitize these areas, leading to greater anxiety and depression.

## Common Causes of Teen Stress

Here are some of the most frequently reported causes of stress amongst teenagers today:

1. School pressure: Juggling schoolwork, studying, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs leaves many teens feeling burned out. The competitive climate around college admissions also elevates school-related stress.
2. Peer pressure: Teens spend more time with peers and value friends' opinions. But this also leads to pressure to fit in and mimic friends' behavior, like substance use or risky activities.
3. Bullying and cyberbullying: Bullying remains prevalent and can include verbal, physical, or online harassment. Cyberbullying via texting or social media is a growing concern, as it can follow teens everywhere.

4. Identity development: Going through the natural process of discovering who they are can cause teens to question themselves and worry about the future. They may stress about their appearance, friendships, sexuality, life goals, etc.
5. Overscheduling: Many teens feel obligated to excel in academics, athletics, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs. Trying to balance everything leads to mental burnout.
6. Family problems: Issues like divorce, moves, financial stress, illness, grief, or family conflict can weigh heavily on teens. Many report arguing more with parents during the adolescent years as well.
7. Romantic relationships: Relationships become central during adolescence. Breakups, unrequited crushes, dating drama, and heartache from failed romance are key stress points.
8. Trauma: Upheaval from events like abuse, violence, accidents, or natural disasters. Loss of a loved one is also very difficult for teenagers to manage.
9. Social isolation: Feelings of loneliness and not having a solid support network can create distress. Isolation tends to increase during big life transitions like starting high school.
10. Expectations about the future: Fear or uncertainty around future plans for college, career, and adult life in general. Many teens also worry about real-world problems like politics, climate change, etc.

## How Stress Affects Teenagers

Chronic stress, if not properly managed, takes both a physical and psychological toll on teenagers:

- Physical effects: headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, weight loss/gain, fatigue, insomnia, weakened immune system
- Psychological effects: anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, self-doubt, trouble concentrating, racing thoughts, memory issues, feelings of being overwhelmed or losing control

Stressed teens may isolate themselves more from friends and family or complain of boredom because they feel too exhausted to engage in activities. More seriously, continual stress through the teenage years can predispose individuals to unhealthy coping behaviors like substance abuse, eating disorders, self-harm, or risky sexual activity.

Research confirms that chronic stress actually damages the architecture of the developing adolescent brain. It inhibits neuronal connections in areas associated with learning and

memory. The amygdala, the brain's emotional center, develops faster during this time, so it becomes hypersensitive to stress. This causes teens to perceive more situations as threatening, continuing the stress cycle.

The good news is that by learning healthy ways to cope with stress early on, teens can reverse negative impacts and set themselves up for better lifelong mental health.

## Signs Your Teen May Be Stressed

Most teens won't come out and directly say "I'm extremely stressed!" But there are many signs parents can look for:

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach issues)
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Irritability, anger, moodiness
- Overreacting to small problems
- Sadness, crying spells, feelings of hopelessness
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Anxious behaviors like nail biting, pacing, restlessness
- Engaging in risky behaviors like alcohol/drug use, vandalism, violence

A combination of emotional, behavioral, and physical symptoms can signal your teen is under more duress than they can healthily manage. Don't ignore these warning signs.

## Helping Your Teen Cope With Stress

As a parent, your love and support can go a long way in helping teens relieve stress in productive ways. Here's how:

1. Keep communication open: Make yourself available for casual chats without an agenda. Ask open-ended questions and simply listen without judgment. Validate their feelings. Letting teens vent is therapeutic.
2. Help put problems in perspective: Teens often catastrophize and see stressors as the end of the world. Offer reassurance and a dose of reality to calm irrational fears.

3. Foster their autonomy: Allow teens to problem solve more independently and make minor decisions to boost their self-confidence.
4. Encourage healthy habits: Ensure they get enough sleep, nutrition, exercise, and downtime. Help them cut back on social media if it's a stress contributor.
5. Monitor their workload: Step in if academics, activities, or work become excessive demands. Prioritize what's truly important.
6. Set a calm, positive tone at home: Model healthy ways you cope with stress like exercise, hobbies, or spending time with family. Don't discuss your own worries excessively around teens.
7. Know when to seek help: If stress seems unmanageable for your teen, consult a doctor, therapist, or school counselor. Severe anxiety or depression may require medication and counseling.
8. Consider mindfulness practices: Meditation, yoga, guided imagery, and breathing exercises help calm the mind and body. Many teens find these effective in reducing day-to-day stress.
9. Suggest immersing in nature: Time outdoors, away from digital noise, helps reset overstimulated teenage brains.
10. Make time for fun and relaxation: Ensure teens take occasional breaks from responsibilities to recharge. Laughing and spending time on hobbies relieves stress.

## Healthy Ways Teens Can Manage Stress

In addition to external support, teach your teens tactics they can independently call upon to manage stress in real-time:

- Take deep breaths: Inhale slowly through the nose, exhale slowly through the mouth. Deep breathing instantly calms the nervous system.
- Go for a walk/run: Getting fresh air and moving the body helps relieve built-up mental tension.
- Listen to music: Soothing music lowers blood pressure and heart rate.
- Take a break from digital devices: Constant stimuli from phones/social media exacerbate stress. Unplug regularly.
- Write in a journal: Expressing emotions on paper is cathartic. Teens should write freely about stressors and how they feel.
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member: Voicing thoughts out loud helps process them in a healthier way. Choose positive confidants.

- Do art/craft activities: Creative outlets like drawing, painting, or working with hands shifts focus away from stress.
- Find humor in situations: Laughing boosts mood and puts problems in perspective. Read funny comics or watch silly videos.
- Listen to soothing music/sounds from nature: Gentle, calming noises relax the mind and nervous system.
- Take a warm bath or shower: Warm water eases muscle tension. Add lavender or Epsom salts for extra calming benefits.
- Cuddle a pet: Stroking animals lowers blood pressure. Their peaceful presence comforts stressed minds.
- Do light stretches/yoga: Gentle movements relieve muscle tension and get stuck energy flowing.
- Meditate or do guided imagery: Quiet the constant mental chatter through focused, mindful breathing. Visualize a peaceful place.
- Practice gratitude: Remind yourself of all your blessings, privileges and strengths to cultivate resilience.
- Get a good night's sleep: Allowing the brain and body to recharge fully prepares teens to better handle daily stressors.

By teaching teens healthy stress management skills, they can learn to face challenges in a calmer, more positive state of mind. This helps nurture their resilience and ability to cope with difficulties throughout life.

## When to Seek Additional Help

If you've tried the above recommendations but your teen is still excessively stressed, it's wise to consult your pediatrician or a mental health professional. Chronic, unrelenting stress during the teen years requires more intensive intervention.

Signs your teen needs urgent help include:

- Withdrawing from family/friends in unhealthy ways
- Severe loss of interest in daily activities
- Significant, prolonged changes in sleep, appetite, energy level
- Talking about suicide or displaying self-harming behaviors
- Regularly using drugs/alcohol, engaging in risky behaviors
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or handling daily responsibilities



- Frequent emotional outbursts, aggression, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, rapid heart rate)

Counseling, therapy, medication, or an intensive outpatient program may be necessary to get teen stress under control before it causes greater psychological damage.

## **Conclusion**

Learning to manage stress in healthy ways is crucial for your teen's mental health and future well-being. As a parent, you play an important role in detecting problems early, communicating supportively, and guiding teens to effective coping strategies. Have patience through the ups and downs, continue showing love, and consult additional help when needed. With your support, teens can overcome challenging stressors today and gain skills to thrive as adults tomorrow.