



ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION

# Information Brief

## Stress in Teens: Strategies to Identify and Manage Stress

## STRESS IN ADOLESCENCE

The American Psychological Association’s *Stress in America* survey revealed that teens are experiencing levels of stress similar to adults. On a rating scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most stressed, teens gave an average rating of 5.8, and adults reported an average stress level of 5.1. Additionally, many Americans have ineffective strategies for coping with stress, and these habits often start during adolescence.<sup>2</sup> Teens are especially stressed during the school year, with 83 percent of teens reporting school as a significant source of stress. Results from this survey indicated that teens reported double the amount of stress during the school year compared to when they were not in school (27 percent of teens reported high levels of stress during the school year compared to 13 percent during the summer). Other reported stressors include managing time to balance activities (59 percent).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Google images

### Common symptoms of stress affecting teens<sup>2</sup>:

- Feeling irritable or angry;
- Feeling nervous or anxious;
- Feeling fatigued or tired;
- Trouble sleeping;
- Headaches;
- Feeling like they could cry;
- Feeling overwhelmed;
- Feeling depressed or sad;
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits;
- Upset stomach or indigestion.

Teen girls reported feeling more symptoms of stress and more social pressures compared to teen boys. For example, teen girls feel pressured to act a certain way, feel stress related to their appearance and feel stress over how others perceive them, especially on social media.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, teens who reported higher levels of **physical activity** (for example, exercising, walking or playing sports) reported **lower** levels of stress and better health overall.<sup>2</sup> Also, teens who get more **sleep** (at least eight hours per night) report being less stressed.

Often, adults are demonstrating poor coping strategies, and teens tend to adopt these. Teens need positive adult role models to model positive strategies for managing stress.<sup>2</sup> Below is a comparison of effective and ineffective habits for dealing with stress.<sup>2, 5</sup> Adults should model and suggest positive habits for teens to manage stress.

#### Effective habits to manage stress:

- Sleeping at least eight hours per night;
- Physical activity (such as sports, exercise or walking);
- Positive relationships and friendships as a source of support;
- Relaxation exercises;
- Mindfulness.

#### Ineffective habits to manage stress:

- Spending time online (especially more than three hours per day);
- Watching TV (more than two hours per day);
- Taking naps (and not sleeping enough at night);
- Overeating or eating unhealthy foods (such as high-calorie, high-fat foods).

## BUILDING POSITIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT HABITS

### Get more sleep:

- Make your bedroom a quiet place. Turn off your computer/phone;
- Take a hot bath or shower and then sleep at a cool temperature if possible;
- If stressed, try to relax with soft music or yoga before bed.<sup>6</sup>

### Engage in physical activity:

- Slowly build the amount of time and difficulty of workouts;
- Make working out enjoyable — find something you like, such as hiking, running, etc.;
- Consider strength or weight training;
- Participate in sports if this is something you enjoy.<sup>8</sup>

## Stress Management Strategies

### Seek out positive relationships with people who:

- Care about you;
- Understand and respect you;
- Solve problems with you and communicate with honesty;
- Share some of your same goals and values.<sup>7</sup>

### Try relaxation exercises:

- Find meditation or guided relaxation videos online;
- Learn about mindfulness (explained in the section below);
- Practice deep breathing;
- Practice progressive muscle relaxation.<sup>9</sup>

## REDUCING STRESS THROUGH MINDFULNESS

The Association for Mindfulness in Education defines mindfulness as “paying attention here and now with kindness and curiosity.”<sup>3</sup> Educators could teach and encourage their students to be mindful in their everyday lives as a way to reduce or prevent stress.

Here are some mindfulness resources that may be useful for educators and parents of teens, as well as teens themselves:

- **Growing up Stressed or Growing up Mindful? — TED Talk by Dr. Chris Willard**
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn1soaM\\_ALQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn1soaM_ALQ)
- **Mindful Teachers: Activities and Teaching Resources**
  - <http://www.mindfulteachers.org/p/free-resources-and-lesson-plans.html>
- **Mindfulness books, websites and apps**
  - <http://mindfulnessforteens.com/resources/>

## EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

An important part of being mindful is to display compassion toward oneself and others. Empathy and compassion are qualities that can reduce stress among teens. World Kindness Day falls in November! This is a good time to talk to teens about how to have empathy (i.e., define empathy) and be kind to others. Research has shown that engaging in acts of kindness increase happiness and decrease stress, and, in fact, even *witnessing* an act of kindness can be beneficial.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2. Google images

Strategies and resources to foster empathy and kindness in students:

- **Enhancing empathy through reading**
  - <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/may/13/reading-teach-children-empathy>
  - <http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/fiction-teaches-empathy-study-shows/>
- **Teaching Tolerance: Developing Empathy lesson plan**
  - <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/developing-empathy>
- **Brené Brown on Empathy — Video**
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw&feature=youtu.be>

## ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

Here are some additional resources that may be helpful for parents, educators and teens regarding stress reduction:

- **Create a Personal Stress-Management Plan**
  - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/For-Teens-Creating-Your-Personal-Stress-Management-Plan.aspx>
- **Generation Stress: From Surviving to Thriving — TED Talk by Kristen Race**
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jRND5IU3Qg>

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