

## Teens and Stress: Coping Mechanisms and Solutions

This is a short presentation on how teens often experience stress and the coping mechanisms teens often employ to deal with this stress in their everyday lives. We'll take a look at the ways in which parents and teachers can help them to healthily deal with pressure and emotions.

### Understanding Stress

The first step to aiding our students and daughters cope with stress is to understand exactly what we are dealing with. "Psychological stress occurs when an individual perceives that environmental demands tax or exceed his or her adaptive capacity."<sup>1</sup>

What that is basically saying to us is that stress is our brains' reaction to any environmental or external event that puts pressure on us, or requires some type of mental or cognitive exertion: anything that requires our brain to really work. Those events are called stressors and these can range from stepping into the road and seeing a car speeding at us, or a teacher assigning a lot of work in a short time, or on the worse end, abuse or neglect.

Based on that definition, you can see that stress is something that people experience every day, several times a day. However, different stressors affect our minds differently and the more pressure or mental capacity a stressor requires of us, the more stressful we perceive the event as. Normal or smaller amounts of stress, called acute stress, can be helpful in keeping us active and alert and motivated by getting some adrenaline pumping through our veins. Take for example, the addition of a timer on a test to get you to work quickly or meet a deadline. Acute stress can even be perceived as "exciting" as shown by people who enjoy roller coasters.<sup>2</sup> In the example of a car speeding at someone, a reaction to get out of the road will save a life.

Chronic stress, however, is stress from a stressor that is either too heavy or too prolonged for us to bear. It can be detrimental to our psychological and physical health and lead to dangerous behavioural patterns that create more issues down the road. It diminishes mental capacity; you can think of it like RAM on a computer; there is only so much our brain can do at a time and if some or even most of our cognitive capacity is occupied with a stressful emotion, there is little space to deal with school work and everyday functions. It can also cause physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, strokes and depression.

### Teens can be stressed too

Adults can often be unaware of the stressors that affect teens due to the changing complexities of adolescent life or the tendency to minimize the stress experienced in their own teen years.<sup>3</sup> I'm sure we have all told a child (or at least thought to ourselves), "What do you know about stress? You haven't seen

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen S, Kessler RC, Gordon UL. Strategies for measuring stress in studies of psychiatric and physical disorder. In: Cohen S, Kessler RC, Gordon UL, eds. Measuring Stress: A Guide for Health and Social Scientists. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 1995:3-26.

<sup>2</sup> Psychology Today. Stress. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress>

<sup>3</sup> LaRue, Denise E; Herrman, Judith W. Adolescent Stress Through the Eyes of High Risk Teens. **Pediatric Nursing**34.5 (Sep/Oct 2008): 375-80.

anything yet!” While this reaction can be explained, it can be hurtful to the teen for several reasons. It may make the adult seem less open to hearing about the teen’s stressors and it also belittles the teen’s own emotions, telling them what they feel is “no big deal” and that they just need to deal with it. This then leads teens to thoughts such as “Well, why can’t I deal with this?” and “Am I not strong enough?” when they are truly dealing with some heavy issues that we are merely unaware of.

On this slide is an infographic from a study published in 2014 by the American Psychological Association (APA). It shows that teens in America are experiencing even more stress than what adults appear to experience, an amount far exceeding the perceived healthy amount.<sup>4</sup>

### **Understanding Teen Stressors**

83% of teens in the APA study cited school as a significant source of stress and 59% reported the same for managing all of their activities and their time. Even though these types of stressors, present mainly in the school year, are the largest contributors to teen stress, 13% of the teens interviewed rated their stress levels during the summer as an 8,9 or 10 on a 10-point scale. Over twice that many reported high stress levels of 8, 9, and 10 during the school. This shows that school is not the only stressor that is prevalent in teens’ lives. Several situations at home, with friends and romantic partners and even regarding their perceptions of themselves can cause great amounts of stress.

### **Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms**

Teens have diminished coping abilities due to the fact they just haven’t experienced as much as adults have and if they have not been taught how to cope with stress, especially chronic stress, they can turn to some very dangerous behaviours. These are some of the common unhealthy coping mechanisms that teens can resort to. Many of these are often done in an attempt to get attention from parents, teachers and others.

- 1) Alcohol and drugs can be used to numb to pain or pressure they feel.
- 2) Eating disorders or emotional eating can be either a comforting action (usually in the form of over-eating), a way of gaining control of their lives or due to loss of appetite.
- 3) Violence may come about due to frustration and an inability to communicate their stress.
- 4) Engaging in sexual relations can be an attention grabber for parents.
- 5) Teens who feel overwhelmed by the stress in their lives may choose to ignore everything and allow life and its stressors to roll by. 40% of the teens in the 2013 APA study reported neglecting their responsibilities at home and 21% neglected their school work.<sup>5</sup>
- 6) Self-Injury is a particularly dangerous combination of many of these coping mechanisms.

### **Self-Injury**

Self-Injury includes mainly cutting and less commonly, burning. Cutting is using a sharp object (a knife, scissors, razor blade, protractor) to scratch or slice shallow cuts on the skin, usually on the wrists, arms,

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<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association. **Are Teens Adopting Adults’ Stress Habits?** Published 2/11/2014. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2013/teen-stress.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

legs, or stomach. Burning is using a lit cigarette or match to burn oneself in similar places. Self-injury can continue into adulthood. It is usually a sign of a traumatic experience or stressor.

Although it sounds scary, self-injury is not usually a suicide attempt. It is more often a cry for help or a way to escape the pain and stress that the individual is feeling. In the case of teens that have blocked the world out, it can be a way to “wake up” from the numbness they may be feeling. It is a way to deal with intense emotions for people who may not know a better way to cope.

There are many obvious issues with self-injury. What if a child was to cut too deep or an injury was to become infected? But the biggest issue with self-injury is that it only gives temporary relief. It is merely a mask for the pain the individual is feeling, not a cure. It does, however, give some short respite from their overwhelming emotions. Because the brain comes to associate self-injury with this fleeting relief, people who self-injure may continue to resort to it in order to get that short lived, feel-good moment that they crave. That is akin to addiction, making it difficult for cutters to stop cutting and making this coping mechanism truly dangerous.

Literature suggests that parents who are concerned about their children engaging in self-harm do not order them to strip so that they can be searched. Instead, be vigilant and look out for straight, orderly cuts or scars on your child’s wrists, arms, legs or torsos.

It does not help to get angry or lecture teens who self-harm. Instead, make sure that they know you care about them and that they deserve to be happy and healthy. Encourage them to talk to you about it, but do not expect an immediate breakthrough. Teens who self-injure often are embarrassed about it and are therefore reluctant to talk about it and may even lash out at people who attempt to do so. Teachers are asked to report students who self-injure so that they may receive help dealing with the behaviour and its causes. Parents are encouraged to seek out professional help for these teens.<sup>6</sup>

### **Dealing with Stress**

Let’s look back at our definition of stress. If stress is our mind’s reaction, that means our mind can be a powerful tool in changing the way that stressors affect us.

4 actions can completely change the way we feel.

Changing the stressor:

- 1) Avoid the stressor if it is unnecessary. Say “no” to turn down potentially stressful situations and staying away from people and things that you know will stress you.
- 2) Alter the stressor. If you know that the stressor is something important that won’t go away, try planning ahead for stressful situations and managing your time so that you deal with small portions of work at a time.

Changing our reaction to the stressor:

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<sup>6</sup> Kid’s Health Organization. Cutting. Retrieved from <http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/cutting.html?WT.ac=t-ra#>

- 3) Adapt to your stressor by changing your outlook. Focus on the big picture and think about other things that are going right. There is always something going right if you are alive and have God on your side. If you are constantly let down, consider changing your standards.
- 4) Accept the stressor. When there is nothing we can do about an event or situation (Natural Disaster, Birth Defect, Death), coming to terms with the situation can help us.<sup>7</sup>

As the common prayer says, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference.”

### **Healthy Coping Mechanisms**

On this slide, you will find some of the coping mechanisms that can help deal with emotions in a healthy way, building up your physical and psychological endurance so that you can better adapt to the stressors in your life and teach your teens to do so as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, M. Coping with stress. (2013, July). Retrieved from [http://www.pamf.org/youngadults/emotions/stress/stress\\_coping.html](http://www.pamf.org/youngadults/emotions/stress/stress_coping.html)

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