

## Talking to teens about stress



Stress isn't just a problem for adults. Young people, too, frequently experience unhealthy levels of stress, as the APA's 2013 Stress in America survey shows.

The survey found that 13- to 17-year-olds are experiencing stress levels higher than they consider to be healthy. School is the top source of stress for teens, followed by the pressure of getting into a good college or deciding what to do after high school.

That stress is leading to emotional and physical symptoms for many young people. The survey found that more than a quarter of teens report symptoms including neglecting responsibilities, feeling overwhelmed, having negative thoughts or changes in sleeping habits. More than a third reported feeling tired, feeling nervous or anxious, or experiencing irritability and anger.

Unfortunately, nearly a third of teens said they weren't sure if they were doing enough to manage their stress. The good news: You can help your child learn to keep stress in check.

### Recognize the symptoms

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Parents want the best for their kids, and sometimes can't bear the thought that their child is struggling. But don't ignore the signs that your teen is experiencing unhealthy stress levels. Irritability, anger, excessive worry, insomnia or sleeping difficulties, and disordered eating (either overeating or eating too little) are common signs of stress in young people. Teens experiencing uncontrolled stress may also be more likely to use illegal drugs or engage in underage drinking, especially when not monitored.

### Communicate

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By keeping the lines of conversation open, your child will be more likely to open up to you when he or she is feeling overwhelmed. Try to spend some undivided, one-on-one time each week with your teen. During this time avoid speech designed to improve him or her but instead use it as an opportunity for shared decision making. While talking with your teen, really listen to what he or she has to say, share any positive thoughts or feelings you are having and let your teen know what you value about his or her perspective.

### Teach healthy coping mechanisms

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Physical activity is one of the best ways to manage stress. Encourage your teen to find opportunities to engage in activities he or she enjoys. Team sports can be great social outlets as well as opportunities for exercise, but they're not for everyone. Yoga, hiking, biking, dancing, walking and swimming are just a few other options that may appeal to your teen. You can also set a positive example for your family by exercising together or encouraging physical activity as a part of family time or events.

Healthy sleep is also important. When stress spikes, sleep often suffers. At the same time, too little sleep can make stress that much worse. Encourage your child to get enough shut-eye.

Limiting screen time and stimulating activities in the evening can help your child fall asleep earlier, so that he or she is better rested when the alarm buzzes.

You can also teach your teen to develop healthy ways to manage the stressful tasks of school and life. In a quest to promote their teen's excellence, parents have a tendency to nag kids to do things a certain way. But teens are becoming adults, and they thrive on shared decision making and building autonomy as they move into young adulthood. Talk with your teen about setting goals and taking small steps to achieve them. Instead of trying to solve problems for your child, try to brainstorm solutions together or elicit ideas from your teen. By helping teens learn to solve problems on their own, they'll be better able to manage stressful situations as they arise, especially once they leave home.

### Create a safe harbor

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Routines and rituals are reassuring for children and teens, and can be especially comforting during stressful times. In addition to providing a sense of security, family rituals help give family members a chance to connect. It's important to establish seasonal (such as a Fourth of July picnic), weekly (e.g., a Thursday movie night) and daily family rituals (a regular family meal). It can be hard for families to make the time for family dinners but they are an example of a type of ritual that gives teens a chance to debrief from the stress of their day while allowing you a regular opportunity to check in with your teen. This type of open communication will make it easier for your teen to come to you when he or she is feeling stressed.

### Model healthy behaviors

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Actions speak louder than words, and that's especially true when parenting teens. Do your best to eat healthy foods, engage in physical activity, get enough sleep and take steps to get your own stress under control.

### Seek professional help

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If you're concerned about your child's stress, consider enlisting help. Psychologists are experts in helping people change unhealthy behaviors and manage stress. You can find a psychologist in your area by using APA's [Psychologist Locator Service](#).

Thanks to psychologists Dawn Wilson, PhD, and David J. Palmiter, PhD, who assisted with this article.