

Teen Health Series

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# Stress Information For Teens, Second Edition

Health Tips About The Mental And Physical  
Consequences Of Stress

Including Facts About The Causes Of Stress, Types Of Stressors,  
Effects Of Stress, Strategies For Managing Stress, And More

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*Omnigraphics*

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# What Causes Stress In Kids?

## The Kids Aren't All Right

There's a disconnect between what children say they're worrying about and what their parents think is stressing them, a gap that could have long-term implications for children's mental and physical health, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA's) latest "Stress in America" research.

Children age 8–17 say they worry about doing well in school, getting into good colleges, and their family's finances. They also report suffering headaches, sleeplessness, and upset stomachs.

But these stresses and symptoms are going largely unnoticed by parents, survey findings show.

In fact, more than one in three children report experiencing headaches in the past month, but only 13 percent of parents think their children experience headaches as a result of stress. In addition, while 44 percent of children report sleeping difficulties, only 13 percent of parents think their kids have trouble sleeping.

The survey also found that about one-fifth of children reported they worry a great deal or a lot, but only three percent of parents rate their children's stress as extreme (an eight, nine, or 10 on a 10-point scale). In addition, almost 30 percent of children worried about their families' financial difficulties, but just 18 percent of parents thought that was a source of worry for their children.

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The findings are troubling because chronic stress left untreated can contribute to psychological problems as well as physical conditions, says Katherine Nordal, PhD, APA's executive director for professional practice. She says parents need to make themselves available and let their children know it's OK to approach them if they're worried about something.

"Parents need to be intentional about setting aside time to be available to their children," she says. "If parents aren't receptive, kids may feel like they're being an additional burden on their parents by talking about their problems."

The online survey, conducted by Harris Interactive for the third consecutive year for the Practice Directorate's ongoing Mind/Body Health public education campaign, polled a nationally representative sample of 1,568 adults in July and August. Results for children age 8–17 were drawn from a YouthQuery survey of 1,206 young people conducted online by Harris in August.

### **Women Still More Stressed**

The findings for adults are also troubling:

- Stress levels are high, with 42 percent of adults indicating their stress worsened in the past year. A total of 24 percent said they had an extreme level of stress (eight, nine, or 10 on a 10-point scale) over the past month, and 51 percent report moderate stress levels (four to seven on a 10-point scale).
- About two-thirds of respondents said they've been diagnosed by a physician with a chronic condition, most commonly high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Seventy percent said a health-care provider recommended lifestyle or behavior changes. That data also show that adults who were advised to make lifestyle changes may not have received enough support from their physicians to do so. In fact, fewer than half were told by their physicians why the changes were important; only 35 percent were given tips or shown techniques for making changes; and only five percent to 10 percent were referred to another health-care provider for follow-up. Similar to last year's results, women report having experienced more stress symptoms than men, such as irritability or anger, fatigue and depression.
- Among parents of 8- to 17-year-olds, mothers reported higher levels of stress than fathers. On a scale of one to 10 (with 10 being the highest level), 15 percent of moms rated their stress as a 10, compared with only three percent of dads. Mothers were also more likely to report lying awake at night, eating unhealthy foods, overeating or skipping a meal because of stress.

Such findings underscore the need for psychologists to work within the nation's health-care system to help people make needed lifestyle and behavioral changes, Nordal says.

“The key in managing stress effectively for both physical and mental well-being is having effective coping strategies, a combination of relaxation strategies along with exercise, combined with good sleep habits and good eating habits,” she says.

This is particularly important for women who often face a “second shift” of caring for children and running a household when they get home from work, says Helen Coons, PhD, a Philadelphia-based clinical health psychologist who works primarily with women. “The reality is, so many women are just too tired. They’re running on empty.”

That calls for change at several levels to support women, says Coons. Workplaces should offer better access to day care and more flexibility to allow women time for medical checkups and exercise breaks. Spouses or partners need to watch the kids while mom goes out for a run or a brisk walk, and neighborhood families can rotate babysitting to give parents more flexibility.

“There’s that African saying, it takes a village to raise a child. I think it takes a community to support women and families” for healthier lifestyles, she says.

### **Mile-High Stress**

This year’s survey also took snapshots of how Americans are faring with stress in eight metropolitan areas—Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, and Washington, DC—comparing results with national findings.

Fairing the worst was Denver, where more than 75 percent of residents report that work and money are significant sources of stress, and 35 percent rated their stress as extreme over the prior month.

That distress sounds familiar to Stephanie Smith, PsyD, public education coordinator for the Colorado Psychological Association and a Denver-based practitioner. Although the city’s unemployment rate isn’t as high as the national average, many of her clients tell her they feel trapped at their jobs. They’re working harder for less money because of layoffs and pay cuts, but they’re unable to find better jobs and frightened of losing their health insurance.

Smith works with her clients to identify things they can do to relieve stress, such as spending more quality time with family and exercising. “We talk about the things you can control in your life,” she says.

In Los Angeles, 71 percent of respondents said they’ve been told by a health provider they have a chronic condition, compared with 66 percent nationally.

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**Table 5.1.** What Stresses Teens Out?

Becky Beacom, health education manager for Palo Alto Medical Foundation (PAMF), surveyed 124 adolescents to explore what they find most stressful. Find out what gives your peers stress below.

Issue	Number Of Times Mentioned	Percent
<b>Homework/School</b>	138	55%
• Grades/GPA		
• Tests		
• College		
• Finals week		
<b>Parents/Family</b>	37	15%
• Expectations		
• Pressure to do well		
• Not achieving/ blowing it		
<b>Social Life</b>	22	(9%)
• Friends		
• Boyfriends/Girlfriends		
• Relationships		
• Extracurriculars		
• Try outs		
• Shows		
• Sex		
<b>Time</b>	20	8%
• No time		
• Deadlines		
• Keeping up		
• Lack of sleep		
• Doing two things at once		
• Too much going on		
• Unprepared		
<b>Sports</b>	10	4%
<b>Other</b>	22	9%

Source: "What Stresses Teens Out?" reprinted with permission from the Palo Alto Medical Foundation Teen Health website, <http://www.pamf.org/teen>, © 2012 Palo Alto Medical Foundation. All rights reserved.

**Table 5.2.** Sources Of Stress By Age

Questions asked parents appear in *italics*; questions asked [youth] appear in **bold**.

	<i>Parents</i>			<b>Youth</b>		
	Total	8–12	13–17	Total	8–12	13–17
	N=235	101	134	1,206	536	670
<i>Managing school pressures/responsibilities/homework/grades/</i> <b>Doing well in school</b>	34%	31%	36%	44%	44%	43%
<i>Relationships with siblings/</i> <b>Getting along with my brother(s) or sister(s)</b>	17%	17%	16%	8%	14%	2%
<i>Relationships with peers/</i> <b>Getting along with my friends</b>	20%	20%	20%	16%	22%	11%
<i>Your family's financial difficulties/</i> <b>My family having enough money</b>	18%	20%	17%	30%	28%	31%
<i>His/her physical appearance/weight/</i> <b>The way I look/My weight</b>	17%	17%	17%	22%	17%	26%
<i>Your relationship with your spouse/partner/</i> <b>My parent(s)/guardian or other family members arguing or fighting more</b>	12%	16%	9%	10%	14%	7%
<i>Pressure managing extracurricular commitments (e.g., sports, hobbies)/</i> <b>Managing activities such as sports, music, clubs, etc.</b>	12%	12%	12%	10%	7%	12%
<i>Peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking, drugs, sex, etc.)/</i> <b>Pressure from friends who want me to try smoking, drinking, drugs, sex, etc.</b>	6%	1%	10%	2%	–	3%
<i>Getting into a good college/Determining future/</i> <b>Getting into a good college/Deciding what to do after high school</b>	3%	1%	5%	17%	5%	29%
<i>Non-financial pressures on family members (e.g., health, job frustrations, getting along with extended family, etc.)</i>	3%	3%	4%	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Getting along with my boyfriend or girlfriend</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	3%	1%	4%
<b>My parents(s)/guardian losing their jobs</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	6%	7%	6%
Other [Asked of parents and youth]	8%	10%	6%	10%	12%	8%

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“To me, that’s absolutely frightening, because we know the role stress plays in wearing our bodies down,” says Michael Ritz, PhD, co-chair of the California Psychological Association’s public education steering committee.

Psychologists can help people manage their stress and live healthier lifestyles, Ritz says.

“That underscores so much why psychologists need to be part of our health-care team,” he says.

## Chapter 6

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# Teens And Stress: Are You Overbooked?

- “How much stress is normal? It’s hard for me to go even a day without stressing about everything from writing a paper to making the soccer team.”
- “I couldn’t handle all my honors classes last year, but I know colleges love AP credits and my parents want me to go to a good school. How can I explain that I can’t do it all anymore?”
- “I’m like a juggler who’s afraid to drop one of the million balls I’ve got up in the air. I can’t relax without feeling like everything will come crashing down on me.”

Do you recognize these feelings of being stressed and overbooked? What conscientious teen hasn’t felt overwhelmed by expectations at some point or another? It’s important to know that there are different types of stress and not all stress is bad. Having some degree of stress in your life can be motivating; it may push you to achieve things you never before thought you were capable of accomplishing. When you find yourself saddled with too much stress, however, you may be tempted to give up on everything, even those activities and challenges you enjoy.

According to Benjamin Hunnicutt, professor of leisure studies at the University of Iowa, “Overbooked kids are a real danger in a society where work is taking on more and more importance in adults’ lives.” Children watch their parents go about their daily schedules, and they can’t help but notice when work starts to sap the time that used to go to family and community activities. “We’re living in a time when adults’ lives have become more scheduled

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About This Chapter: “Teens And Stress: Are You Overbooked?” *Decisions*, Winter 2005 newsletter. Reprinted with permission from SADD, Inc. (<http://sadd.org>), © 2005. Reviewed by Dr. David A. Cooke, MD, FACP, March 2013.

and more hectic, and children seem to be encouraged to join the pace at an earlier age than ever before,” says Hunnicutt. No wonder many teens are feeling burned out by the time they reach high school!

It’s certainly important to find activities you enjoy and to commit to them. Whether it’s a part-time job after school, community service through your church, or playing varsity sports, learning to be a responsible member of a group is part of growing up and can be a lot of fun. When you find that your schedule has crossed the line from rewarding to completely overwhelming, however, you may find you are doing yourself more harm than good.

Often the difference between successful and unsuccessful people is their ability to manage time. There is no magic formula to knowing just how many activities are appropriate; that depends on how you deal with the pressures and commitment each one requires. If you’re a person who values free time above other endeavors, you need to remember this when you’re choosing your commitments. Perhaps adding another night of drama practice won’t bring you as much enjoyment as having a free night to chill out on your own. On the other hand, if you’re a person who thrives in structured scheduling, you might be able to handle joining the choir when you’re already treasurer of Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) and captain of the swimming team. The secret to being happy, healthy, and successful during these important years is finding your own way to balance the things you need to do with the things you enjoy doing.

Parents need to take responsibility too. Millions of children and teens across the country feel overwhelmed and pressured. Psychologist Alvin Rosenfield, MD, author of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, believes that enrolling kids in too many activities is a trend that has spread nationwide. “Overscheduling our children is not only a widespread phenomenon, it’s also how we parent today,” he says. “Parents think that they’re not being good parents if their kids aren’t in all kinds of activities. Children are under pressure to achieve, to be competitive. I know sixth-graders who are already working on their resumes so they’ll have an edge when they apply to college.” In fact, colleges do not want students who “dabble” in many activities. They want students who are committed to school and to those activities that they do best.

Other experts echo Rosenfield’s observations. “Kids in America are so overscheduled that they have no [free] time. They have no time to call on their own resources and be creative. Creativity is making something out of nothing, and it takes time for that to happen,” says Diane Ehrensaft, PhD, of the Wright Institute. “In our efforts to raise Renaissance children who are competitive in all areas, we squelch creativity.” This type of pressure can leave kids feeling overwhelmed and stressed out.

### Signs You Are Stressed

Worried about work, money, friends, or family? Sometimes stress can build up before you know it and leave you feeling overwhelmed. Take a look at these signs of stress and find out how to recognize stress before it takes over.

You know you're stressed if:

1. You eat standing up.
2. Your dog doesn't recognize you.
3. You're always late.
4. You forget what day it is.
5. You have trouble finishing a sentence.
6. Your friends greet you, "Hey, stranger!"
7. You're drinking more than usual.
8. You're fighting more than usual.
9. You can't remember what "usual" is.
10. You do three things at once; you don't finish any of them.
11. You lose your keys. And your glasses. And your patience.
12. You only talk to people via e-mail.
13. You're always tired.
14. You can't sleep.
15. You keep getting sick.
16. You keep dropping things.
17. You bite your nails, tap your feet, and twirl your hair. All at the same time.
18. You feel like you're drowning.
19. You don't have time to feed your fish.
20. Your blood pressure is too high.
21. Your morale is too low.
22. You jump when the phone rings.
23. You eat. And eat. And eat.
24. You have a headache. Again.
25. Your palms are sweaty.
26. Your heart is racing.
27. You feel nervous or jumpy.
28. Nothing seems fun anymore.
29. You snap at your friends.
30. Your socks don't match.
31. You yell at your partner.
32. You hate getting up in the morning.
33. You drive too fast.
34. You talk too fast.
35. You cry at the drop of a hat.
36. You can't breathe.
37. You can't concentrate.
38. You keep bumping into things.
39. You can't see over the laundry.
40. You're never alone.
41. You're always alone.
42. You live on coffee, cigarettes, or diet soda.
43. You haven't opened the mail in days.
44. It's always someone else's fault.
45. People keep asking: "Are you okay?"
46. You wonder if you are okay.

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A pioneer in the field of stress research, Hans Selye, MD, describes two different types of stress that teens feel: eustress and distress. Eustress is the pleasant stress we feel when we confront the normal challenges of life. A teen who loves basketball may thrive on the pressures of practices and games. Distress, on the other hand, occurs when we feel overwhelmed. The same kid who loves basketball may start to see it as a burden when it becomes one of four or five other activities.

The key to solving this problem seems to lie in one word: balance. Finding the happy medium between scheduled activities and free time will keep most teens on an even keel. If you find yourself overbooked, take a serious look at where your time is going. Prioritize things that you must do (i.e., going to school) and then find some time for the one or two things you most want to do. If hockey is fun but it takes time away from your real passion, playing drums in a band, it might be time to hang up your skates.

Enjoying a few activities and doing them well will always bring you more satisfaction than stretching yourself too thin by trying to do everything.