

Developing Coping Skills for Teens

Some of you may be experiencing a good deal of anxiety over stressful life events. It may be true that we are forever exposed to stressful situations, but it is also true that we have many responses available to us. It's possible to learn how to cope more effectively with stress and thereby increase your potential for success. Here we present some coping strategies to enable you to deal with stress.

An explanation about what stress is may be useful in your understanding and controlling of it. Stress is your body's reaction to situations that frighten, irritate, or endanger you. Some of our reactions are learned, others come from our ancestors. The three major sources of stress are: your body's physical reactions, your environment, and your thoughts.

The first source, your physical reactions, are part of your ancestry, known as the fight or flight response. Thus when you are confronted with a threat (be it a dinosaur or a chemistry test), your brain sends messages to mobilize your forces to confront or to escape. This mobilization includes your pupils getting larger so you can see better, your hearing becoming more acute, your muscles tensing to deal with the challenge, blood pulsating through your head providing more oxygen to your brain cells, and your heart and respiration rates increasing. These physical responses are all useful and even possibly life saving if triggered by a sudden crashing sound near you. But these responses can also cause you to tense up when preparing for an exam and interfere with your ability to study. Therefore, we must learn how to turn off our fight or flight response when necessary.

The second source of stress comes from the environment. Being a teen exposes you to many stressors, such as school deadlines and tests, work and social relationships, girlfriends/boyfriends, parent's expectations, etc. Not coping well with environmental stressors causes depressed feelings, such as unworthiness and emptiness.

The third source of stress comes from our thoughts. How we interpret and label our experiences serves either to relax us or to stress us. Interpreting that rain will cause you to have a bad day causes tension. Accepting that rain is a natural event and that it does not cause bad days is more logical. What you attach, by means of your interpretation, causes the reaction in you.

Each of the sources of stress mentioned above can be controlled by using the following coping strategies. Practice and persistence, however, are necessary.

1. **Figure out what the problem is...** What is the cause of the stress, what is it doing to you, and how can you solve the problem? Learn to break big problems into smaller parts that can then be dealt with one part at a time.
2. **Let some things go...** People often waste their energy worrying about things they can't change, then don't have enough energy left over to fix the things they can change.
3. **Put things into proper perspective...** Thinking that, because you do not know the answer to a question on a test, will the cause you to fail the test, which will then lead to failing the subject, which will then lead to failing out of the world, is both illogical and needlessly stressful. Squash these illogical ideas.
4. **Plan your future...** Think and plan your future using realistic goals. If you're too stressed to plan for the long term future, at least plan for the short term (like tomorrow).
5. **Chill-out and relax...** It's a fact that one cannot be both tensed and relaxed at the same time. Therefore, being able to substitute a feeling of relaxation and well being for feelings of tenseness increases our effectiveness on the tasks at hand. Spend time with family and friends. Get involved with after-school activities. Volunteer - you have a lot to offer. Read books on subjects that uplift you. Write your feelings and thoughts in a journal, blog, or diary.
6. **Breath right...** Proper breathing, which raises the oxygen level in the body, effectively reduces anxiety, fatigue, and depression. Shallow breathing contributes to feelings of tension. Do not, however, force breathing, which can lead to hyperventilation. Be sure to laugh and keep your sense of humor!
7. **Be assertive...** Our interaction with others often leads to undesirable stress. Learning to be more assertive with others helps to reduce that stress. Do not tolerate physical or sexual abuse from anyone. If this is the case, get help immediately!
8. **Manage your time...** How we organize our time can either contribute to, or reduce our stress.
9. **Eat right...** Proper eating contributes to feelings of well being, but an occasional chocolate fix is good!
10. **Sleep well...** Getting enough sleep on a regular basis is essential for good health by keeping stress levels manageable.
11. **Exercise regularly...** Physical activity is a good mechanism for getting rid of tension.
12. **Don't forget to play...** A good balance between work and play is always desirable.
13. **Change the usual routines...** Doing the same thing day after day causes boredom and tension. Shake it up every so often.

You do not have to surrender to tension, anxiety, and stress; we all have the ability to control our reactions. You don't need luck when dealing with life, but you do need effective stress management skills. But do seek help if you feel really overwhelmed or troubled.