



## **SIGNS OF STRESS**

Everyone experiences stress at times. It is the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation.

It can be difficult to avoid all stress completely, and it is important for young people to know that. Learning to manage it makes all the difference.

### **Fight or Flight**

The human body responds to events provoking stress by activating the nervous system and specific hormones, releasing more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol into the bloodstream.

These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and metabolism. This helps us quickly and effectively handle the pressure of a stressful moment. Even though stress can be a positive thing, like when it helps us prepare for events, when we have too much and it can seem as if it is taking over.

Too much stress can make teens or young adults feel panicked or overwhelmed and helpless. When this happens, managing it becomes a challenge and learning to manage it is crucial for young people to get the best out of situations.

### **What causes young people to over-stress?**

Stress affects everybody in a different way. What causes one person to become over-stressed may not have the same effect on someone else.

Some of the things that cause young people to become over-stressed include:

- Exams
- Problems at school or work
- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- Relationships
- New responsibilities
- Moving to a new place
- A traumatic events – such as the death of a loved one
- New or chronic illness or disability
- Peer pressure, being bullied
- Unrealistic expectations from themselves, family, friends or culture
- Taking on too many activities
- Having too high expectations

Sometimes young people can manage the stress caused by these situations. At other times, several situations can come together at once and may cause too much stress. On the other hand, one situation alone could feel overwhelming.

## **Signs of Stress**

Possible warning signs include:

- Anger or irritability
- Being anxious
- Avoiding other people
- Crying
- Moodiness – feeling frustrated with things that normally don't bother them
- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence
- Anxiety attacks
- Depression or sadness

Physical signs to look out for include:

- Upset stomach, diarrhoea or indigestion
- Headache
- Backache
- Inability to sleep
- Eating too much or too little
- Raised heart rate
- Smoking
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Lowering of academic achievement
- Talking or joking about self-harm or suicide
- Secretive behaviour
- Lateness or absence from school

## **Helping your child to manage stress**

It is not usually possible to completely remove stress from young people's lives. Besides, we would not want to because a small amount of stress can be good, helping with study for example and keeping them alert.

There are ways to help manage stress so that it does not begin to have the negative impacts previously mentioned.

Help your child manage stress by:

- Ensuring your expectations for them reflects their abilities and aspirations
- Recognising the signs of stress and being supportive
- Listening – nothing is more important for young people than having people they can depend on providing emotional support
- Be encouraging – focus on the positive
- Supporting involvement in sports and other social activities

## Methods of dealing with stress

Young people can decrease stress with the following behaviours and techniques, which you as a parent can model and encourage.

**Tackle the problem** – when feeling stressed, it is not always clear what is causing it. Figuring out the cause can make it seem more manageable. Ignoring the problem may make it worse. Help them figure out the cause by reflecting on recent events, behaviours or thoughts or encourage them to write it down.

**Talk to someone** – young people need to know that it is always OK to talk about how they are feeling and there is always someone there to listen. Sharing stressful feelings, worries and concerns with people they trust can reduce stress, offer fresh perspectives and help find ways of coping we may never have thought of on our own.

**Go for a walk or run** – exercising can be a good way of relieving stress. It helps to get rid of all that pent up energy and can leave us feeling much calmer. Any sort of exercise can be good. Regular exercise has many benefits to physical and mental health.

**Take some deep breaths** – deep breathing can help to relax the body and calm us down. Taking deep breaths before an exam, game or before going on stage can help to calm us down and focus on what it is we are about to do.

**Managing expectations** – feeling external pressure from parents, teachers, sports coaches and friends can cause huge stress among young people. Internal pressure to do well can also cause stress. Help them set realistic goals based on their abilities and interests and ways to achieve them. This is especially important around exam time or before important games.

**Have multiple options to achieve goals** – there is never just one-way to achieve something. Let your child know that if one way does not work out, there may be other ways of achieving their goals.

**Avoid smoking, alcohol and caffeine** – young people can often be tempted to use smoking, alcohol or caffeine as a way of coping with stress. It can also be a coping mechanism they pick up from home. It may feel better in the short term, but in the long run stimulants will increase stress levels. Energy drinks should also be avoided as they can give a strong burst of energy followed by a crash shortly after.

Further information can be found at <https://ie.reachout.com/parents/> and <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-manage-and-reduce-stress>

## Anxiety in young people

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of fear or stress. It is quite a common feeling everyone experiences at some stage. However, if it persists, it can create problems for your child.

Anxiety is also a normal emotional response to stressful situations.

What makes one person anxious does not always cause the same response in others.

Some young people worry about exams and school, while others do not. Meeting new people is stressful for some, while others relish the opportunity.

## Anxiety vs anxiety disorder

While anxiety is an everyday feeling, it becomes a problem if it interferes with young people's normal day-to-day activities and persists for more than a couple of weeks. If this is happening to your child, they may be experiencing an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders can make someone feel nervous a lot of the time, for long periods of time and in many different situations.

## Types of anxiety disorders

There are many different types of anxiety disorders, each with their own symptoms.

- **Generalised anxiety disorder** occurs where there are excessive and uncontrollable worries, not specific to any one thing.
- **Social anxiety or social phobia** involves a fear of social or performance situations (such as meeting new people) in which an individual may feel embarrassed or like they are being judged. People with social anxiety commonly avoid social situations.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** involves unwanted repetitive thoughts, images and/or impulses (obsessions). It also includes repetitive, routine behaviours called compulsions.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is an anxiety disorder sparked by a major traumatic event, such as rape or a car accident.
- **Upsetting memories or flashbacks**, nightmares, avoidance of situations, which trigger memories, feeling "on edge", "blunting" of emotions, nightmares and difficulties sleeping, can occur.
- **Panic disorder** occurs when you have frequent unexpected unpredictable panic attacks. Some people may develop agoraphobia as a result of the panic attacks.
- **Agoraphobia** is anxiety related to being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult or embarrassing. It is often related to the fear of having a panic attack that others may witness. It usually leads to avoidance of certain places and situations.
- **Specific phobias** involve intense and ongoing fear of particular objects or situations e.g. spiders, needles.
- **Hypochondria** refers to an extreme concern or worry about having a serious illness. People with hypochondria have a constant fixation with their body; self-examining and self-diagnosing.

## What causes anxiety?

Many things can trigger anxiety, such as our environment, stressful situations like school exams, problems within the family, or a traumatic event.

Sometimes it is a combination of lots of different factors and the exact cause of the anxiety is not always clear.

## What are the symptoms of anxiety?

Anxiety can affect young people's physical and mental health. It might be short lived, or stay for a long time.

Taken on their own, individual symptoms of anxiety are things that we all experience from time-to-time.

Some of the symptoms:

- Irritable, argumentative or frequently in a bad mood
- Worried/constantly feel something bad will happen
- Often asks unnecessary questions or requires constant reassurance
- Gets upset with mistakes, or with a change of routine
- Perfectionism or difficulty concentrating
- Dry mouth or difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty getting to and staying asleep and/or nightmares
- Muscle tension and headaches
- Restlessness, trembling, shaking
- Rapid heart-rate and breathing or sweating, dizziness, headache
- Feeling sick: nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea.

If your child experiences more than one of these symptoms over a couple of weeks, or if it affects their day-to-day life, they may need some extra support.

## Supporting your child

The following tips are a general set of recommendations on how to support your son or daughter if they are feeling anxious.

- **Talk to your child** – if they are willing to talk about their fears and anxieties, listen carefully and respectfully. Acknowledge their fears, do not dismiss or ignore them. Let them know you are there to support them.
- **Ask about their feelings** – if you see your child is experiencing a strong emotion, ask them about it; “You look worried, is there something on your mind?” or “It sounds like you’re really angry, would you like to talk about it?” Listen carefully, do not dismiss their emotions and show concerns for their feelings. By helping them to trace the emotion to a specific situation, you may help to reduce the overwhelming nature of their feelings.
- **Problem solving** – this does not mean solve the problem for them. Instead, help them break down the problem situation into smaller, more manageable steps. Help them identify possible solutions and weigh up which one might be worth trying.

Encourage your child by reminding them of previous times when they have dealt well with problems.

## **Be a good role model**

Demonstrate through your own behaviour how to take care of yourself. When you think about your child's wellbeing, think about your own too.

- **Focus on the positive** – young people can get lost in their negative thoughts and self-criticism. Try helping your child focus on their positive attributes and the good aspects of a situation.
- **Stay calm** – young people pick up on their parent's emotions. If you are anxious, your child is likely to pick up on your anxiety and experience an increase in their own anxiety.

## **If you feel it is serious**

Seek professional advice. If anxiety begins to take over your child's life, affecting their day-to-day activities, seek professional advice from your GP. They should be able to recommend and/or refer your child to a professional specialising in treating anxiety in young people.

There are many different forms of therapy that have resulted in successful treatment of anxiety. Cognitive behavioural therapy is just one of these. It is considered effective in addressing anxiety disorders. This approach helps young people to examine their anxiety, anticipate situations in which it is likely to occur and understand its effects. Through this process, a corrective approach to the problem is developed.

Further information can be found at <https://ie.reachout.com/parents/> and <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/overcome-fear-anxiety>