

Strategies for Academic Success

Reducing Students' Stress

After administering a needs assessment questionnaire to middle school students, counselors discovered that a large percentage of our students are feeling stressed about managing expectations from school, families, friends, and themselves. They are also concerned about their study and organizational skills.

Like adults, teens experience stress in response to emotional, physical, or mental demands, internal and external. Compounding their stress levels are fast growth, hormonal changes, and mood swings. In addition, teens may manifest stress physiologically and psychologically. Milder symptoms of stress may include headaches and stomach aches. Whereas more serious symptoms may manifest in behavioral issues, insomnia, depression, severe anxiety, school phobia, and substance abuse. According to Stressfocus.com, “studies show that stress is responsible for 70% of visits to doctors and is the reason for 85% of serious illnesses.”

Moreover, sources at Massachusetts Hospital for Children (see website link on last page), share that stress causes the body to release various hormones and may impact all systems in the body. If not addressed and corrected, stress may impair the immune system, reduce teens' ability to complete homework, and affect their concentration. Parents may sometimes think that their child is making excuses about feeling ill to avoid school and schoolwork, but often, the physical and psychological distress that the child feels is real and most likely has been created by stress and anxiety.



So, how can you know if your teens are feeling stressed and overwhelmed? *Ask them.* Although you can often tell by teens' behavior if they are stressed, that is not always the case, considering the normal developmental stages of teens: testing limits and authority; mood swings; preoccupation with their appearance and how others perceive them; seeking more independence; feeling vulnerable, insecure and fearful of rejection; poor diet and sleep habits; and rapid physical changes. Teens normally experience a few if not all of these stages at some point during their adolescence, so imagine their distress if these stages are exacerbated by physical and psychological manifestations of stress.

If your teens admit to being affected by stress, ask them what they feel are their greatest stressors. If they provide a general response such as “everything—school, home, friends...”, tackle each area separately by asking open-ended questions such as, “what about school causes you the most stress?” As you discuss each area of concern, write down the information your teens provide; it is important to pinpoint the primary causes of stress. Do the teens feel overwhelmed by their workload — school and home — and feel that they do not have enough time to adequately manage everyone's expectations, including their own? Perhaps they don't feel that their workload is the

Student Planner Usage

primary issue, but disorganization hinders their ability to complete all work; or, do they procrastinate and leave work to the last hour, thereby increasing their stress levels?

After you discover your teens' primary stressors, discuss and implement strategies to manage their work- and activity-loads.

STUDENT PLANNER

Utilize the Student Planner/monitor completion of homework.

Each middle school student received a student planner. Students are required to take their planners to every class and write down details, including due dates of all their homework assignments, projects, quizzes and tests. After students have completed their homework, we ask parents/guardians to check their children's work and compare it with the student planners to ensure that all work has been completed, including time spent studying for quizzes and tests. If students complete homework assignments during Flex, they should bring that work home so that parents may verify that all assignments have been completed. Except for long term projects, which they should work on each day until the deadline, we recommend that students complete homework the same day that it is assigned.

If your child is saying on a regular basis that he or she does not have homework, have him or her take the agenda to the teachers for initialing. When the student takes the planner to the teacher, the teacher will check the entry for accuracy and then initial it. If there is

no homework, "No Homework" needs to be written in the agenda and the teacher will initial the entry.

Further, parents/guardians are encouraged to talk with their child to negotiate appropriate incentives for getting all entries in the planner initialed, taking it home, along with all books and notebooks, and completing the work that evening, including studying for quizzes and tests. After the work is completed, you may decide that your child may play outside with friends for an hour or two, have access to the computer, Wii, or whatever you have negotiated ahead of time. If, however, the work is not completed, or the agenda has been forgotten at school, the student should not receive any privileges for that evening: computer, TV, playing with friends, etc. This then gives him an incentive to follow the rules the next day if he wants his privileges returned. In general, we find that daily incentives and consequences have a greater impact on students than long-term ones such as being grounded until the next quarter grades come out, which can ultimately be demotivating.

After parents have confirmed all work has been completed, we ask that they initial the homework entries, and ensure that the completed worksheets and handouts go into the appropriate notebooks, rather than the bottom of the backpacks. Enforcing the use of the planner ultimately reduces stress for students; if they complete their work each day and meet deadlines, they do not fall behind, nor have to play catch-up, and they will perform better on quizzes and tests.

Study Skills

Time Management.

Students often feel that they have too much to do on a daily basis, which can lead to burnout. Assuming a student gets home by 3:15 pm, she will have 6 1/4 hours before bedtime, if bedtime is at 9:30 pm. To determine if your child has enough time to meet all commitments plus have downtime, write down each of your child's afternoon and evening activities and determine the time commitment required for each.

If a student gets home by 3:15 pm, and she takes a 15 minute break to unwind and eat a snack, homework can be started by 3:30 pm and, most nights, completed by 5:00 pm, including time studying for quizzes and tests. On some evenings, working on projects and studying for major tests may require more than 1 1/2 hours of study.

Now, only 4 1/2 hours remain before bedtime. And, if you deduct one hour before bedtime to allow your child time to unwind and relax prior to going to bed, only 3 1/2 hours remain. How much time does the child spend on chores around the house and eating dinner? How much time is spent in organized sports (practice and games), church and community related activities, babysitting younger siblings, etc. If after evaluating the time commitments (including commuting time), you find that your child does not have enough time to study or sleep 8 or more hours per day, you may want to review the activity list to determine what can be eliminated to reduce your child's and your stress levels (less time carpooling and arguing with children about participating in activities in which they may no longer be interested.)

Organization Skills.

Lack of organization is a major stressor for many students. Here are some suggestions to help your child be more organized:

1. Ensure that the Student Planner is being used.
2. Ensure that completed worksheets and handouts are being placed in the appropriate homework folders—either one folder for all subjects, a folder for blue days and one for green days, or a homework pocket for each subject notebook, whatever is most convenient for your child.
3. Clean out and organize the backpack and locker. With your child, go through her backpack and notebooks at the end of each week to organize paperwork, and ensure that all handouts needed to study for tests have been reviewed and projects are given adequate attention. And, if necessary, come to school and help your child clean out and organize her locker at the end of each quarter.
4. Place all items required for the next school day in the backpack and place it next to the front door.
5. Pack lunch or provide lunch money the night before school to reduce time constraints in the morning.
6. Encourage your child to take a shower in the evening or get up a little earlier in the morning to allow enough time to eat breakfast and get to school on time.

Healthy Habits

Healthy Habits Optimize Brain Power.

1. Ensure that your child gets 8 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Many students are staying up until 11:00 pm or later, some well after midnight, which does not allow enough sleep to function optimally. Sleep deprivation can cause brain-fog, fatigue, an inability to concentrate, irritability, and increase susceptibility to illnesses. When students are chronically fatigued, it may be difficult for them to motivate themselves to complete homework, focus on classroom discussions, or even stay awake in class. Ideally, students should go to bed by 9:30 pm—at the latest. If it takes them thirty minutes to fall asleep and they wake up at 6:00 am, they will get 8 hours of sleep.
2. Eat a healthy breakfast which includes protein, complex carbohydrates, fiber and good fats/oils. Although students may like cereals such as Fruit Loops, they are loaded with sugar and empty calories, which may cause lethargy, headaches, and brain-fog. A healthy breakfast (and lunch and dinner) will provide students good nutrition—vitamins, minerals, and nutrients necessary for energy and optimal growth and function.
3. Exercise. It is not only good for the body but also the mind and emotions. Exercising releases endorphins, which are neurotransmitters that make you feel good and boost your mood. Exercising also reduces cortisol (stress hormones). One healthy habit is to take the family for daily walks around the neighborhood, or get a mini-

trampoline (rebounder) to use during winter months. Another option to boost mood, reduce stress, and get brain synapses firing is to gather the family and dance to disco music—playing and laughing together as a family will reduce stress for all. One more bonus to exercise—brisk walking and other forms of exercise will oxygenate your brain and increase blood circulation, which sharpen your mind.

If you have implemented many or all of these strategies and your child is still frequently stressed and anxious, you may want to take her/him to the pediatrician for a check-up.

Resources/Sources

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/teens.health/CC00019>

<http://homeworktips.about.com>

<http://education.com>

<http://www.stressfocus.com>

<http://massgeneral.org>

<http://www.TPRonline.org>

<http://www.lifespan.org>

<http://kidshealth.org>

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20322801>

