

stressed? read this.



Even though stress makes us feel uncomfortable, it's not always a bad thing. Sometimes stress can really help us deal with tough situations. A lot of stress changes our bodies quickly and helps us react to an emergency. A little stress keeps us alert and helps us work harder.

What is stress?

Stress is the **uncomfortable** feeling you get when you're worried, scared, angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed. It is caused by emotions, but it affects your mood and body. Many **adults think that kids don't have stress** because they don't have to work and support a family. **They are wrong!** Stress can come from things that happen to you and people in your life like your parents, friends, and even yourself.

How does the body handle stress?

The body is a finely tuned machine that can change quickly to do what we need it to do—like react to stress. The body actually has 2 different sets of nerves. **One works while we're relaxed, and the other works when we're stressed or there's an emergency.** These 2 systems can't work together at the same time. It's important to know this because we can **shut off** the emergency system by turning on the relaxed system. **That helps us feel better!**

Ways you can deal with stress

Nobody can avoid all stress, but **you can learn ways to deal with it.** When you're stressed, it is normal to want to feel better. Some people turn to drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, bullying, or fighting. These harmful choices might feel good for a short time, but they can be dangerous. They end up messing up your life, and then you end up a lot more stressed. *They're especially dangerous if they are the only way you manage stress.* This is one of the ways addictions start.

There are many **healthy ways** of dealing with stress. They are safe, help you feel better, and end up making you happy. **Here is a 10-point plan to help you manage stress.** All of these ideas can lower stress safely. None of them are quick fixes, but they will lead you toward a healthy and successful life. The plan is divided into 4 parts.

1. Tackling the problem
2. Taking care of my body
3. Managing my emotions
4. Making the world a better place

When you read over the plan, you'll notice that you can come up with a bunch of ideas for each point. **Please do not think you should try them all. This plan is supposed to help you manage stress, not give you more.** Try out some ideas and then stick to one or two ideas for each point. *Don't choose an idea just to impress someone else.*

Part 1

Tackling the problem

Point 1: Figure out what the problem is and make it manageable.

A lot of people deal with problems by ignoring them. **This does not make them go away; usually they just get worse.** People who try to fix their problems tend to be **emotionally healthier.**

What you can try

- Break the work into small pieces.** Then just do one small piece at a time, rather than look at the whole huge mess. As you finish each piece, the work *becomes less overwhelming.*
- Make lists of what you need to do.** This will **help you sleep** because your head won't spin with worry about whether you can do everything. At the end of the day, you will have **less to worry about** as you check off the things you have finished. You will look at the same huge amount of homework and say to yourself, "I CAN do this!"
- Get your work done first.** When it comes to work (studying, chores), the *best way to enjoy yourself is to get the work done first.* Sometimes people say they will do fun things first and do their work later. But the problem is they're having less fun because they're worrying about the work they're ignoring. And of course the longer they put it off, the more they worry.

Point 2: Avoid things that bring me down.

Sometimes we know **exactly** when we are headed for trouble. Avoiding trouble from a distance **is easier** than avoiding it up close. You know the people who might be a bad influence on you. You know the places where you're likely to get in trouble. You know the things that upset you. **Choose not to be around those people, places, and things that mess you up.**

What you can try

- Avoid certain people, like _____
- Avoid certain places, like _____
- Avoid certain things, like _____

Point 3: Let some things go.

It's important to try to fix problems, but *sometimes there is nothing you can do to change them.* For example, you can't change the weather, so don't waste your energy worrying about it. You can't change the fact that teachers give tests, so just start studying instead of complaining about how unfair they are. You can't change the fact that your parents need to know where you go, so prove to them that you are responsible and deserve more freedom. **People who waste their energy worrying about things they can't change don't have enough energy left over to fix the things they can.**

What you can try

- Instead of worrying about things I can't change, I will _____
- Instead of complaining that things are not fair, I will _____
- Instead of fighting with my parents about where I go, I will _____

Part 2 Taking care of my body

Point 4: Exercise.

Exercise every day to control stress and build a strong, healthy body. **Exercise is the most important part of a plan to manage stress.** You may think you don't have time to exercise when you're most stressed, but that is exactly when you need it the most. If you are stressed about a test but too nervous to sit down and study...*exercise!* **You will be able to think better** after you have used up that stress energy.

What you can try

Regular exercise builds a strong body that better deals with stress. I will work my body hard at least 20 minutes every other day. The kinds of exercises I like to do routinely include

- _____
- _____
- _____

When I am feeling most worried, nervous, or fearful, a really hard physical workout will help me calm down. During these most stressful times, the kinds of things I might do include

- _____
- _____
- _____

Point 5: Learn to relax my body.

You can fool your body into being calmer by turning on the relaxed nervous system.

What you can try

- Breathe deeply and slowly.** Slow, deep breathing turns on your relaxed nervous system and turns off your emergency response. Take a big, deep breath until your chest and belly feel full of air, then let it out slowly as if you're blowing bubbles. **Do this 10 times and you will feel more relaxed.** Yoga and meditation also teach great breathing skills.
- Put your body in a relaxed position.**
 - Your body knows when you're nervous. If you sit down to take a test and your legs are shaking, your body is saying, "I want to run!" Remember, you can't think well and run away at the same time, so you are making it harder to take the test. Instead, take deep breaths and lean back—tell your body there is no emergency.

- When you're angry, the natural thing to do is stand up and face someone shoulder-to-shoulder, chest-to-chest. You do this without even thinking, but this tells the other person that you're angry and ready to fight. It also may prevent you from thinking clearly. Do the **opposite** of what you would do if you were really going to fight. **Sit down; take deep, slow breaths; and tell your body there is no danger.** Then use your brain to get out of the situation.

Point 6: Eat well.

Everyone knows good nutrition makes you healthier. But only some people know that **it also keeps you alert and your mood steady.** People who eat mostly junk food have highs and lows in their energy levels. This hurts their ability to manage stress.

What you can try

- Eat a good breakfast.
- Skip fewer meals.
- Drink fewer sodas and sugary drinks.
- Drink more water.
- Eat smaller portions.
- Eat less greasy meals or snacks.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables.
- _____
- _____

Point 7: Sleep well.

Most kids don't get the sleep they need to grow and think clearly. **Tired people can't learn as well and can be much crankier.**

What you can try

- Go to sleep about the same time every night.**
- Exercise (but finish exercising at least 4 hours before bed).** Your body falls asleep most easily when it has cooled down. If you exercise right before bed, you will be overheated and won't sleep well.
- A hot shower 1 hour before bedtime** also helps your body relax to fall asleep.
- Use your bed only to sleep.** Don't solve your problems in bed. Instead, have another spot to think, like a "worry chair." Give yourself plenty of time to think things through, make a list if you need to, **and then set it aside!** Go to bed to sleep.
- Don't do homework, watch TV, read, or use the phone while in bed.**

Part 3 Managing my emotions

Point 8: Take instant vacations.

Sometimes the best way to de-stress is to imagine yourself in a more relaxing place.

What you can try

- Visualize.** When you're stressed, sit down, lean back, take deep breaths, close your eyes, and imagine yourself in a beautiful and calm place.

- Take time out for yourself.** Everyone deserves time for himself or herself. Enjoy a walk, a relaxing bath, or something special every day. Try a warm bath with your ears just under water; listen to yourself take deep, slow breaths. Take your pulse and count as your heart rate goes down.
- Enjoy hobbies** or creative art as an instant vacation.
- Look at the beauty around you** and get pleasure from the small things you may have stopped noticing.
- Read** a good book and escape from reality. You have to imagine the sights, sounds, and smells—you are somewhere else for a while.

Point 9: Release emotions.

Feelings sometimes get so strong and scary that we cram them all in an imaginary box and **think we'll deal with them later**. But later, there's so much stuff in the box that there is too much to deal with. Sometimes it's good to **pick just one problem** to work on and forget the rest for a while. When you decide to deal with only one problem at a time, it seems much less scary.

What you can try

- Be creative.** People who have a way to express themselves don't need to hold it all inside. Art, music, poetry, singing, dance, and rap are all powerful ways to let your feelings out.
- Talk it out.** Every young person deserves an adult to talk to and some friends to trust. Hopefully, you can talk to your parents. But if you do not want to tell your parents everything, make sure to find an adult you can ask for advice.
- Journal.** Write it out!
- Pray.** Many young people find prayer or meditation helpful.
- Laugh or cry.** Let yourself really feel your emotions.

Part 4

Making the world a better place

Point 10: Make the world a better place.

Young people who work to make the world better feel good about themselves. They have a **sense of purpose and handle their own problems better**. They learn that they can **make a difference** in other people's lives. **We need young people to build a better world.**

What you can try

- Help a member of my family by _____
- Volunteer in my community by _____
- Help the environment (or animals) by _____

When to get help

Even if you are great at dealing with problems, there may be times when stress feels like it is getting to you. **You are not alone**. This does not mean you are crazy, weak, or a failure. **Strong people turn to others** for support when they have too much to handle. **It's okay** to turn to wise friends for advice, but it is also important to turn to your parents or another adult to help you. **You deserve to feel good!**

The following signs suggest that you should seek some extra guidance:

- Your grades are dropping.
- You worry a lot.
- You easily get moody or angry.
- You feel tired all the time.
- You get a lot of headaches, dizziness, chest pain, or stomach pain.
- You feel sad or hopeless.
- You feel bored all the time and are less interested in being with friends.
- You are thinking about using alcohol or drugs to try to feel better.
- You ever think about hurting yourself.

Visit the AAP Web site at www.aap.org/stress for more information.

Remember that one of the best ways to be happy and successful is to manage stress well.

You CAN do it!

Adapted from Ginsburg KR, Jablow MM. *A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Your Child Roots and Wings*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2006

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From your doctor

