

Stress Management & Relaxation

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What is Stress?

Stress has become a fact of life in our fast paced world.



Stress can cause people to feel overwhelmed or pushed to the limit, and prolonged or extreme stress can be maladaptive. Low levels of stress can be good for you when managed in healthy ways such as playing competitive sports or studying for an exam. Stress can come from many sources: environmental (traffic, bad weather), social (fights with friends and family), deadlines

at work, financial problems, and physiological changes (illness/injury, aging, hormones, and sleep disturbances).

The first and most important part of stress management is being able to know how to recognize high stress levels, and then to learn how to take action to handle it in healthy ways.

When you're stressed your body reacts physically (increased heart rate and blood pressure, tight muscles, and shorter & shallower breathing), you might have difficulty thinking and concentrating or have trouble sleeping, feel more irritable, gain or lose weight, or experience somatic symptoms like headaches or upset stomach.

Stress Management:

Stress has an impact physiologically, emotionally, and mentally. Being able to control stress is a learned behavior, and we all need a little extra help managing it. It is important to find healthy ways to manage stress and strategies for relaxation can be part of a total plan to combat stress in your life. Here are some simple relaxation strategies that can work for kids, teens, and adults. Try to practice these when you're calm as it's easier to learn the steps when you are relaxed and thinking clearly. Before bed can be a great time since trying to calm down and relax is a great part of a healthy sleep routine. Then the next time you find yourself feeling very stressed (e.g., bad traffic, just before a big test, many due dates, scary thunderstorms) rate your stress level on a scale from 1 (no stress) to 10 (very stressed). Try to use one of these strategies. Then rate your stress again and see how much it's gone down!

Deep Belly Breathing:

When we're stressed (or anxious/scared) we tend to breathe quickly and shallowly. Slow, deep breaths help us calm

down, release tension, and can reduce both stress and anxiety.

Breathe in through your nose to a count of 4 (1-mississippi, 2-mississippi, etc.) then breathe out through your mouth slowly (like you're blowing a bubble) for a count of 4 (1-mississippi, 2-mississippi, etc.).

You want to breathe deep so that you're filling your whole lungs not just the top portion. We call this "Belly Breathing" because when you breathe deeply you can see your belly rise and fall. Try placing your hands on your belly so that your finger tips just barely touch. Then breathe in nice and deep. If it's deep enough your belly will rise moving your fingers apart slightly so that they no longer touch. Repeat at least 5-10 times.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

When we're stressed, anxious, or scared we tend to contract our muscles making them feel tight and sore. Often, we do this unconsciously and may not realize it. Sometimes intentionally tensing and then relaxing one muscle at a time helps make us become more aware of how tight our muscles are, and helps us to relax.

Start at either the top of your body (head/face) or the bottom (toes/feet). Try to deliberately tense or squeeze one particular part of your body such as toes or feet. Squeeze it as tight as you can without hurting. Hold for a count of 5-10 (1-mississippi, 2-mississippi, etc.) then release. Notice how it feels when muscles are tight and then how different it feels when your muscles are relaxed. Repeat. Then move up to the next muscle (e.g., legs) and systematically work your way up your body one muscle group at a time. Each time tense/squeeze, hold, then release and repeat while noticing the difference in how your body feels. Once you reach the top of your body (face/head) and you can systematically work your way back down again.

Guided Imagery:

When we're stressed, anxious or scared our thinking is reflects the worry, stress, and anxiety. Changing what you think can change how you feel both emotionally and physically. Guided imagery gives you something specific to think about that evokes calming, relaxing, and peaceful feelings. The trick is to focus on as much detail in the im-

age as possible (e.g., textures, colours, smells, how the light reflects off the water, the way the sand feels under your feet, the smell of Grandma's cookies baking, etc.) so that you are experiencing the imagery as close to reality as is possible. Using imagery, you visualize a special, peaceful place where you feel safe and relaxed and your worries disappear. It is a special place you can return to whenever you want, and the details make you feel as if you are actually there.

You can make up your own guided imagery or you can follow written or taped examples available online and at for sale at bookstores. Sometimes people read a descriptive passage out loud, but it works better to listen to it by either having someone else read it or listening to a CD. Listening works best because this lets you shut your eyes and focus all your energy on painting a picture in your mind. Sometimes it helps to have calming background music, and younger children and teens have often tried painting or colouring a picture of their "happy, relaxing place". While the wording might change depending on age and vocabulary levels, guided imagery can be easily modified to work with most age groups. Below is an example of guided imagery. Try using one of these descriptions, and then you can come up with your own personal imagery! When practicing guided imagery, you would find somewhere comfortable to sit or lie down, then relax your muscles and breathe slowly and deeply.

Imagine you are walking toward the ocean... You can hear the waves up ahead.... you can smell the ocean spray.... the air is moist and warm.... feel a pleasant, cool breeze blowing through the trees.... You walk along a path....coming closer to the sea....you see the brilliant aqua color of the ocean ahead....You walk onto a long stretch of white sand.... the sand is very soft powder.... imagine taking off your shoes, and walking through the hot, white sand toward the water....

Hear the waves crashing to the shore....Smell the clean salt water and beach....You gaze again toward the water.... it is a bright blue-green....See the waves washing up onto the sand.... and receding back toward the ocean.... washing up.... and flowing back down.... Imagine yourself walking toward the water.... over the fine, hot sand.... you are feeling very hot....As you approach the water; you can feel the mist from the ocean on



your skin. You walk closer to the waves, and feel the sand becoming wet and firm....A wave washes over the sand toward you.... and touches your toes before receding...As you step forward, more waves wash over your feet... feel the cool water provide relief from the heat....Now you are feeling calm and refreshed... Stroll along the beach at the water's edge.... free of worries...

no stress... calm.... enjoying this holiday....Up ahead is a comfortable lounge chair and towel, just for you...Sit or lie down in the chair.... relax on the chair or towel.... enjoying the sun.... the breeze.... the waves.... You feel peaceful and relaxed.... allow all your stresses to melt away.... When you are ready to return from your vacation, do so slowly....Bring yourself back to your usual level of alertness and awareness....Keep with you the feeling of calm and relaxation.... feeling ready to return to your day....Open your eyes, stretch your muscles... and become fully alert... refreshed... and filled with energy.

Other great stress management strategies:

- Relaxing bath, shower, or hot tub
- Listening to music
- Massage
- Yoga
- Laughing
- Exercise
- Playing a sport

If you find yourself experiencing a great deal of stress on a regular basis speak to the psychological consultant at your school for other strategies to cope with stress.



For further information and suggestions contact the psychology staff at your school or Dr. D. Lean, Chief Psychologist.

