

Help your family develop ways to cope with stress

Awareness and balance

For all students

Stress is a part of everyday life. There are often times when it is quite normal to feel “stressed.” It is important that we develop an awareness of when we are becoming overwhelmed by stress. All of us differ in our resilience to stress and this can also vary at different points in our lives. At any age, we can benefit from learning how to cope with stress so that we can achieve more balance in our lives.

What do adults find stressful?

A survey conducted in 2000 (Ipsos-Reid) found that 63% of Canadians feel the same or more stress than they did five years ago. The most commonly reported stressors were time pressure (trying to do too much at once), job stress, finances, worries about children, marital problems and health concerns.

What do children find stressful?

Children feel stress, but it often goes unrecognized. What we perceive as stressful from an adult point of view may not be what children find stressful. In addition, what is considered stressful varies developmentally with the age of a child. Children report stressors such as, being away from home (5 to 7 yrs.), getting along with friends, school work, being different from others, family tension and quarreling, divorce, moving to a new town, excessive pressure to do well, failing a grade, getting a serious illness.

Recognizing when you are becoming too stressed

Many adults report difficulties with sleep when stressed. The following have also been identified:

- impaired relationships at work and/or at home
- increased irritability
- poor concentration
- physical complaints (e.g. headaches, backaches, bronchitis and emphysema, stomach pains and ulcers, high blood pressure, muscle aches)

- weakened immune system leading to more colds etc.
- increase or decrease in appetite

Recognizing when your child is becoming too stressed

It is important to talk to your child about how stressed he might be feeling. Any significant change from your child’s usual behavior is a warning sign and you should discuss potential stressors.

Some children “internalize” or hold in stress. They may try very hard to be good, are worriers, have low-self esteem, be fearful or shy, cry easily and have physical symptoms such as, headaches, stomach aches and frequent illnesses.

Children can also “externalize” or act out stress. They may lose their temper easily, become demanding or destructive, become extremely restless, and tease and bully others. Signs similar to adults may also be apparent:

- irritable
- problems sleeping
- poor concentration
- problems getting along with others

How can you cope better with the stress in your life?

The basic necessities can be powerful antidotes to stress. Exercise, good nutrition and rest provide your body with the resources it needs to deal with stressors. Specific relaxation techniques (progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, visual imagery) are also useful in reducing how stressed we feel. You may want to consider the following:

- take some quiet time for yourself, read a book, have a bath, have a nap
- take breaks during the day to stretch, have a snack, quiet your mind

- do something you really enjoy once a week or, better yet, once a day
- do something kind for someone else
- do one thing at a time and give it your full attention
- make time to play, dance or sing
- don't forget your sense of humor—laugh
- try to take on a more optimistic and forgiving viewpoint
- relax your standards (do the dishes really need to be washed right this minute?)
- set realistic goals for your day
- write out your thoughts and feelings in a journal
- talk about your thoughts and feelings with a trusted friend
- try to reduce your negative self-talk and substitute positive affirmations

Discuss your concerns with your family doctor, pediatrician, therapist or counselor.

How can you help your child cope with stress?

Research has demonstrated that having a close and loving relationship with at least one parent or adult can make a difference in how resilient children are. Try to make some special time for your child. The basics of exercise, good nutrition and rest also apply to children. Relaxation techniques adjusted to a child's specific developmental level can also be used. You may wish to consider the following:

- help your child talk about her feelings and what might be bothering her
- let your child know that it's okay to express his feelings
- give back rubs and hugs
- teach and model that mistakes are okay
- provide clear rules and consistent consequences
- teach your child how to handle difficult situations and solve problems
- remember you are a role model for your child and this includes how you handle stress
- don't forget your sense of humour
- allow your child to have quiet time
- have some play time with your child and ENJOY her
- encourage your child to participate in something he is good at

Don't feel that you are alone in coping with your stress or the stressors your child might be facing.