



**Bradley Hospital**

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## Teens, Stress and How Parents Can Help



The early teen years are marked by rapid changes — physical, cognitive, and emotional. Young people may also face other challenges, including changing relationships with peers, demands at school, family tensions, or safety issues in their communities. The ways teens cope with these stressors can have short- and long-term consequences for their physical and emotional health.

### What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to a challenge, which could be anything from physical danger to asking someone for a date. The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and signaling the adrenal glands to produce more adrenaline and cortisol. This response to stress kicks in much more quickly in teens than in adults because the part of the brain that can calmly assess danger and call off the stress response is not fully developed yet.

The stress response can cause problems when it overreacts or persists. Long-term situations, like coping with a parent's divorce or being bullied at school, can produce a lasting, low-level stress that can wear out the body's reserves, weaken the immune system, and make an adolescent feel depleted.

### Good stress versus bad stress

We all experience both "good" stress and "bad" stress.

Good stress results in our feeling energized and motivated to do our best work. Good stress encourages us to develop effective coping strategies to deal with challenges, contributing to our resilience.

Bad stress occurs when our coping mechanisms are overwhelmed. Stress can become distress when we are unable to cope or when we believe that we can't meet the challenge. The solution is to adapt and find methods to turn bad stress into good stress.

### Causes of teen stress

Among the many sources of stress for teens and adolescents are: school pressure and career decisions; after-school or summer jobs; dating and friendships; pressure to experiment with drugs, alcohol, or sex, or to be a particular size or body shape; being bullied or exposed to violence or sexual harassment.

### Signs of stress

If your teen begins to display these signs, they may need help: increased complaints of headache, stomachache, muscle pain and/or tiredness; withdrawing from people and activities; increased anger, irritability, or crying; feelings of hopelessness; sleep and eating changes; difficulty concentrating; experimenting with drugs or alcohol.

### Strategies for coping with stress

You can help your teen learn how to manage stress better, using some of these strategies: talk about problems with others; take deep breaths, accompanied by thinking or saying aloud, "I can handle this"; set small goals; exercise and eat regular meals; get enough sleep.

Also, focus on what you can control (your reactions, your actions) and let go of what you cannot (other people's expectations); work through worst-case scenarios until they seem funny or absurd; give up on the idea of perfection; give yourself permission and cultivate the ability to learn from mistakes.

### What can parents do

There are many things parents can do to help reduce a child's anxiety while building a better parent-child relationship. Among them: be aware of your child's behaviors and emotions; cultivate trust; be open to talk with your child when he or she is ready; encourage expression of feelings; teach and model good emotional responses.

Also, remind your child of his or her ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends; monitor TV programs that could worry your child, as well as the use of computer games and the Internet; make your child aware of the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol before experimentation begins; monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.

### How to Get Help

Kids' Link RI at 1-855-543-5465 (KID LINK) is a pediatric behavioral health triage service and referral network that can help parents access treatment for their child.

BH Link at 401-404-5465 enables all Rhode Islanders 18 and older who are experiencing mental health and substance use crises to receive the appropriate services they need as quickly as possible.