

WHAT STRESSES ADOLESCENTS?

When we talk about stress, most people think about how we react to problems that are difficult to deal with. Sometimes these problems are major "life events" that are unexpected or unusual. Parents may be going through a divorce. Young teens may be breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Perhaps the adolescent has been hurt in an accident. Other problems are more common day-to-day difficulties. From studies with adolescents, we have learned two important things.

- A "pile-up" of many stressful life events in a small amount of time is more difficult for adolescents than dealing with just one event.
- Ongoing, day-to-day stresses and strains are harder on adolescents than major life events. If a major event causes stress, it is often because it sets off a chain of events that changes the on-going, day-to-day conditions of their lives.

The most common sources of day-to-day stress for young adolescents in grades six through nine are

- problems with peers (including "romances")
- family issues or problems with parents
- school-related problems or pressures
- their own thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (feeling depressed or lonely, getting into trouble because of their behavior)

Of course, these problems are fairly routine for most adolescents. Kids who live in different places, though, may face different kinds of stressors. Some adolescents live in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and violence. Others live in isolated, rural areas. Obviously, they'll have different kinds of problems.

HOW DO ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH STRESS?

Adolescents react to stress in much the same ways adults do. Common reactions are excitement, fear, anxiety, sadness, and anger. The behavior of an adolescent who is stressed may change, but each adolescent reacts in a different way. Some adolescents withdraw from others, some lash out at others, and some actively seek the comfort of others.

Although adolescents cope with stress in different ways, there are general patterns in their coping behaviors. There are two major ways to cope with stress. One way is **PROBLEM SOLVING**. This involves trying to deal with the problem by changing the situation or getting rid of the problem. Another way of handling stress is **MANAGING EMOTIONS**. This involves handling the thoughts and feelings caused by the problem.

Adolescents use both methods, and both can be effective, depending on what the problem is and when it started. Studies show that people who deal with their problems, see the positive side of difficult situations, and take part in activities they enjoy are more likely to be well-adjusted. Acting to solve problems often requires planning. Sometimes it requires learning new skills. For example, coping with poor grades might require

learning study skills and making time to complete homework. Coping with feeling left out might require learning social skills. An example of seeing the positive side would be focusing on your team's good performance even though they lost the game.

Managing emotions can be very helpful when an adolescent is dealing with an uncontrollable problem. It can also be helpful in the early stages of coping with a problem. For example, blowing off steam, avoidance, and distraction can be important ways of getting prepared to cope more directly with difficult situations. Studies show that the most common ways young adolescents cope with stress are listening to music and watching television. Another way of resolving stressful situations is to find meaning in the experience. It helps if teens can see that something good is coming out of the problem. Finally, doing something enjoyable provides time out from stress. It often "recharges batteries" so the person can go back to dealing with stress.

WHAT CAN ADULTS DO TO HELP ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH STRESS?

Adults can help adolescents solve problems and manage their emotions in at least three ways. They can provide help, encouragement, and support during times of stress. They can help them develop the knowledge and skills to cope with future difficulties. And adults can get help for themselves when they need it.

PROVIDE HELP, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND SUPPORT

- Encourage adolescents to talk about what they are going through, and be willing to listen. Ask questions so you can understand the problem. Don't just jump to conclusions and give advice. Depending on the situation, adolescents may not want advice. They may just want to be understood. Even if a problem seems small to you, it may be a major concern for the child. Minimizing a problem or saying "you'll get over it" is not helpful. It gives the message that you don't understand or are not willing to listen. Ask them if they want your advice or if they would like to know what you would do.
- Offer reassurance, encouragement, and support. Be willing to provide verbal or physical comfort, but don't be discouraged if the adolescent rejects your effort or is irritable. These are normal reactions to stress. Be patient and let the child know you're available if he or she needs you.
- Continue to provide structure, stability, and predictability. Within reason, stick to the same rules, roles, and routines.
- Encourage them to participate in activities they normally enjoy.
- Try to build a relationship so that adolescents will feel comfortable coming to you when they need help. It helps if they can just express how they feel or what they are going through.

HELP THEM DEVELOP COPING SKILLS

Model effective coping skills. Talk about how you deal with problems in your life. Make it clear that you are willing to talk about difficulties they may be facing.

Help adolescents learn and practice problem-solving skills. Help them develop social skills.

- Suggest ways of coping with difficult situations. Help them understand that they can cope in different ways.
- Teach them specific skills they can use to make decisions or solve problems. Then give them chances to practice these skills. Help them identify their problem, come up with possible solutions, and evaluate the pros and cons of each.

Help them learn and practice ways of managing their emotions.

- Teach them safe ways to blow off steam and relax. They could go for walks, play basketball, listen to music, or talk with someone.
- Help them develop ways to see problems and situations in a different light. Get them to see the positive side of things and to talk to themselves to help manage their emotions.

Help them learn and practice skills that will allow them to participate in and enjoy new activities. Provide opportunities for activities that are fun and enjoyable. This can help adolescents recharge their batteries and blow off steam.

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