
Teens and Stress

by Dr. David Smith

As the new school year begins, children and teens will feel more stress and pressure. A certain amount of stress in our lives is normal and helps drive achievement. In fact, learning how to cope with stress and deal effectively with the demands of life are important skills that teens and young adults must develop to have happier, healthier, more productive and resilient adulthoods.

Kids have always experienced stress. In my practice, however, kids seem more stressed than ever — by academic demands, by parental pressure, by the constant social media presence in their social relationships, and by their own expectations of themselves and their fears for the future.

The 2013 McCreary Adolescent Survey of 60,000 BC youth found that 83% of all youth said they had been stressed in the last month. Girls are more likely than boys at every age to report extreme stress — feeling so stressed that it prevented them from functioning properly. When stress builds with no release, it can lead to anxiety, depression, and despair.

As the school year starts, here are seven proven steps that you and your kids can take to better cope with stress this year.

1) **Have a family routine:** The more reliable and regular the routine at your home, the more stable and in control your children will feel. Regular times for getting up, going to bed, doing homework, having dinner, doing chores, and engaging in extracurricular activities all enable children to create a schedule for themselves and know what to expect. Numerous research studies have shown that regular sit down family dinners are associated with increased self-esteem and school success and lower rates of eating disorders, alcohol and substance use, and feelings of depression or thoughts of suicide.

2) **Limit and monitor screen time:** Social and peer group issues for many youth cause greater stress than academic pressure. In previous generations home was a refuge from that social stress. Now social media amplifies that stress 24/7. Set limits for time spent online, and monitor what is happening with your youth online. Talk to your kids about how to be safe and how to conduct themselves with social media.

3) **Ensure enough sleep:** Young children need at least 12 hours of sleep a night and teenagers at least nine or ten, but many are getting much less. Adequate sleep reduces stress and increases coping skills. Don't let kids sleep with their cell phones or laptops as late night screen time, as well as texts and emails, prevents good quality sleep. Limit caffeinated drinks; make sure you model good sleep habits, too.

4) **Get regular exercise:** One of the best ways to manage stress is to move. Recent studies have found that activity out-of doors, such as walking or running in nature, has great stress reduction power too.

5) Don't over schedule: A certain amount of extracurricular activity is good for kids — it teaches them new skills, creates new friends, gives them exercise. But so many young people have so much on their plate they become overwhelmed and exhausted. Give them unscheduled downtime, too.

6) Engage in activities that provide personal value and meaning: Studies show that engaging in activities that help youth feel connected to the world and provide personal value and meaning are good for stress reduction. This can mean something different for everyone and can take the form of religious worship, nature walks, meditation, uplifting art, music, or books or any other spiritual connection that helps provide purpose and perspective to our lives.

7) Learn some key stress-reduction skills: Cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) like relaxation breathing, visualization, mindfulness meditation, thought stopping, "chunking" big tasks into smaller, doable pieces and other skills can help manage stress. In the next column, I will talk in depth about some key CBT skills that we all should know how to do.

In the meantime, check out these BC links for helpful articles and tips on stress and youth:

kelymentalhealth.ca; anxietybc.ca; healthlinkbc.ca; mindcheck.ca. The BC chapter of the Canadian Mental Health Association has information and an interactive stress test, see cmha.bc.ca/files/stress.htm.

Dr. David Smith is an adolescent and adult psychiatrist and the medical director of the Okanagan Psychiatric services for Interior Health. This series of columns on common child and youth mental health issues is a project of the [Child and Youth Mental Health and Substances Use Collaborative](#), jointly funded by Doctors of BC and the government of BC. The Collaborative recently received a national award from the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

