
Stress and Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

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STRESS

Stress:

- A term coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye; his definition:

“The non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.”

He also described stress in two ways:

- Distress (caused by negative situations)
- Eustress (caused by positive situations)

Implications:

- Life is filled with change and adaptation
- Stress is universal and experienced by everyone
- Stress is physical; however, reactions are unique
- Awareness of personal reactions is essential
- Identifying sources of change and resulting stress can be helpful



THE BAD NEWS

- **You can't cure stress by thinking or worrying about it.**
- **Being bright, talented, creative, motivated, smart, ambitious, and even good looking can add to the stress in your life.**
- **Academic success and drive aren't enough to make life manageable. The world is too complicated and intense, and it's changing too fast.**
- **There are no easy answers, simple solutions, or quick fixes for managing stress.**
- **Only a handful of families and schools teach the lifeskills you need to successfully deal with stress.**

From: FIGHTING INVISIBLE TIGERS: A STRESS MANAGEMENT GUIDE FOR TEENS by Earl Hipp, Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, 1985.

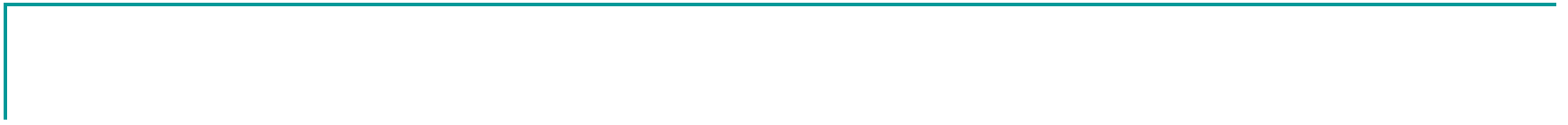
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THE GOOD NEWS

- You *can* learn to understand why your life gets oppressive, depressive, stressed or otherwise unhealthy.
- You *can* learn to live in a new and better way.
- You *can* feel more in charge of your world.
- Even a small change in your lifestyle can make a big difference.
- Kids can learn the signals from their body and make adjustments accordingly.

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Facets of Self

SPICES

- Social
- Physical
- Intellectual
- Creative
- Emotional
- Spiritual

Signs of Stress

Physical

- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite
- Chronic fatigue
- Vague stomach upset
- Low grade infection
- Rashes
- Frequent colds
- Headaches

Emotional

- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Panic
- Inappropriate laughter
- Feelings of failure
- Feelings of unworthiness

Signs of Stress

Behavioral

- Fighting
- Stealing
- Refusing to do school work
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Yelling/significant & frequent tantrums
- Running away from school or truancy
- Attention-seeking behaviors (significant)
- Arson

Spiritual

- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Confusion about feeling connected to self and others
- Feeling rudderless; without a moral compass
- Loss of compassionate nature
- No sense of belonging
- Abandonment of spiritual practices (meditation, visualization, prayer, mantra)

Typical Sources of Anxiety (No control)

- Terrorism
- Hurricanes, Tornadoes, Tsunamis
- Exposure to violence (media; personally)
- Death; loss of loved one
- Bullying (including cyberbullying)
- Discrimination (race, gender, sexual orientation)

Sources of Stress for Gifted People

- SITUATIONAL
 - SELF-IMPOSED
 - EXISTENTIAL
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Situational

- conflict between our values and the values of others (what is and what ought to be)
- interpersonal disharmony
- lack of intellectual stimulation or challenge
- challenges beyond our capability to respond
- threats to emotional or physical well-being
- lack of resources to accomplish a task
- time constraints

Self-imposed

- setting excessively high standards for ourselves
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- negative self-talk
- emotionally loaded/highly evaluative beliefs about ourselves and our environment
- believing that everyone should love, respect, and praise us
- buying into others' negative evaluations of us
- catastrophizing
- worrying

Existential

- global concerns (e.g., nuclear disaster, war, poverty, world hunger, the environment, etc.)
- idealism
- anger at fate
- isolation
- need for meaning and purpose

BASIC TOOLS FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

- Remember the “basics” (Maslow's basic needs) - H.A.L.T.
- Make contact - the “talking cure” or the “writing cure”
- Identify what's what:
 - what stresses *you* out,
 - when enough is enough for *you*, and
 - what works for *you!*
- Books can help—for you and your kids
- *Your rights are all right* - learn how to assert yourself appropriately
- The art of negotiation
- Your “sacred circle” - supportive relationships
- Progress is progressive - one step at a time! “Inch by inch is a cinch; yard by yard is too darn hard!”
- Learn to be a human being (not a human “doing”)
- Humor helps
- Who's in charge here?
- Saying “no”

Strategies to Help Gifted Kids with Stress

- Share resources for meditation and visualization; explain the effect on the body
- Explain the biology of stress; determine which how the body sends signals
- Encourage deep breathing and exercise to minimize personal stress
- Supply biographies of notables that were able to resolve personal situations
- Promote experiences in nature as a way to self-soothe

Strategies to Help Gifted Kids with Stress

Situational:

- Explore topics, where appropriate, that create cause for concern (e.g., what do you think about the destruction of the rain forests?)
- Provide situations for connecting with intellectual peers or mentor
- Share information on personality type (introversion vs. extraversion and implications in social situations)
- Provide specific techniques for conflict resolution and appropriate assertiveness
- Elicit suggestions from kids on how to use time more efficiently

Strategies to Help Gifted Kids with Stress

Situational:

- Demonstrate decision-making strategies (how does the family select a movie?)
- Use journals to help kids sort out their feelings, fears, joys and frustrations
- Help kids set goals by week, unit or semester – evaluate both the goals and goal-setting process.; modify goals with the kids when their goals aren't achieved
- Role play or use “social stories” to rehearse how to deal with uncomfortable social situations
- Limit exposure to unsettling images/sounds from media sources and computer games

Strategies to Help Gifted Kids with Stress

Self-imposed:

- Teach creative problem solving strategies and apply to personal situation
- Hold family meetings regularly
- Model creative, risk-taking behaviors; encourage “courageous conversations” so kids can speak their truth and others can witness
- Probe personal beliefs and concerns; help kids identify issues/stressors
- Use social stories to role-play situations

Strategies to Help Gifted Kids with Stress

Existential:

- Provide opportunities for students to learn more about world events and the process of change
- Explore service learning projects so there are outlets for caring
- Teach kids how to search for careers that address deep concerns
- Bring gifted students together to develop relationships with older, younger, or online peers
- Use bibliotherapy and cinematherapy to provide an “arms-length” approach for delving into topics
- Connect kids to mentors who share similar concerns and passions

HOW NATURE HELPS CHILDREN REDUCE STRESS

- Research links mental, physical, and spiritual health to connection with nature (Louv, 2005)
- Effective stress reduction is apparent after experiences in nature
- Deeper sensory awareness and sense of interrelatedness of beings emerges with environmental education
- Nature provides healing/respice for those children in unhealthy life situations
- Stimulates powers of observation and enhances perceptive abilities
- Fosters creativity including construction of forts, shelter, tree houses (a sense of place)
- Instills a sense of peace and a deeper connection to the Universe
- Inspires creative endeavors such as poetry, art, storytelling, and drama
- Opportunities for problem-solving, team-building, healthy risk-taking
- Provides opportunities for positive experiences that are self-generated and without any or little expense

FLOURISH

Elements of Well-Being Theory

Properties:

- **Contribute to well-being**
- **Pursue for own sake**
- **Defined and independent of other elements**

Measurable elements:

- **Positive emotion (includes happiness)**
- **Engagement (flow)**
- **Meaning**
- **Relationships**
- **Achievement**

Contemplative Practices

- Quiet the mind, focus attention, adopt a receptive attitude
 - meditation (concentration; loving-kindness, mindfulness)
 - mind-body connecting; walk the labyrinth
 - visualization
 - practice imagery/fantasy
 - deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation
 - Tai-chi; Brain Gym
 - bibliotherapy, cinematherapy
 - journaling
 - experiences in nature
 - time with pet
 - artistic practices (calligraphy, mandalas)
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Why is Contemplative Education Necessary for Gifted Children?

- Gifted kids dwell on things that create internal dissonance (e.g. global issues, natural disasters)
 - Existential angst appears earlier in the developmental process for many gifted kids
 - Executive functions of the brain (planning, organizing, self-regulation) may lag behind cognitive development; education/training helps
 - Intensity and sensitivity may create significant emotional turmoil for gifted kids
 - Profiles of gifted children should be matched appropriately to the practice; find the ones that work
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Helping Kids Develop Self-Advocacy

- Be responsible
 - For your behavior
 - For your feelings

- Make choices
 - Expectations

- Get to know yourself
 - Name your feelings
 - Talk about feelings
 - Dealing with strong feelings

- Get and use power
 - Personal power
 - Role power

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