

Understanding Stress

Stress: In a medical or biological context stress is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. Stresses can be external (from the environment, psychological, or social situations) or internal (illness, or from a medical procedure). Stress can initiate the "fight or flight" response, a complex reaction of neurologic and endocrinologic systems.

What happens in your brain?

Once your brain has decided there's a danger, it sends immediate nerve signals down your spinal cord to your **adrenal glands** telling them to release the hormone adrenaline. Once released, adrenaline increases the amount of sugar in your blood, increases your heart rate and raises your blood pressure (and has many other actions).

Long-term effects of stress

Your body's stress response is perfect in the short-term, but damaging if it goes on for weeks or years. Raised levels of cortisol for prolonged periods can damp down your immune system and decrease the number of brain cells so impairing your memory. It can also affect your blood pressure and the fats in your blood making it more likely you will have a heart attack or stroke.

What are the signs of stress in a child?

Physical symptoms can include:

- Decreased appetite, other changes in eating habits.
- Headache.
- New or recurrent bedwetting.
- Nightmares.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Upset stomach or vague stomach pain.
- Other physical symptoms with no physical illness.

Sources of Stress

Stress is a function of the demands placed on us and our ability to meet them. These demands often come from outside sources, such as family, jobs, friends, or school. But it also can come from within, often related to what we think we should be doing versus what we're actually able to do.

Stress can affect anyone who feels overwhelmed — even kids. In preschoolers, separation from parents can cause anxiety. As kids get older, academic and social pressures (especially from trying to fit in) create stress.

Many kids are too busy to have time to play creatively or relax after school. Kids who complain about all their activities or who refuse to go to them might be overscheduled.

Talk with your kids about how they feel about extracurricular activities. If they complain, discuss the pros and cons of stopping one activity. If stopping isn't an option, explore ways to help manage your child's time and responsibilities to lessen the anxiety.

Kids' stress may be intensified by more than just what's happening in their own lives. Do your kids hear you talking about troubles at work, worrying about a relative's illness, or arguing with your spouse about financial matters? Parents should watch how they discuss such issues when their kids are near because children will pick up on their parents' anxieties and start to worry themselves.

World news can cause stress. Kids who see disturbing images on TV or hear talk of natural disasters, war, and terrorism may worry about their own safety and that of the people they love. Talk to your kids about what they see and hear, and monitor what they watch on TV so that you can help them understand what's going on.

Also, be aware of complicating factors, such as an illness, death of a loved one, or a divorce. When these are added to the everyday pressures kids face, the stress is magnified. Even the most amicable divorce can be tough for kids because their basic security system — their family — is undergoing a big change. Separated or divorced parents should never put kids in a position of having to choose sides or expose them to negative comments about the other spouse.

Also realize that some things that aren't a big deal to adults can cause significant stress for kids. Let your kids know that you understand they're stressed and don't dismiss their feelings as inappropriate.

12 Tips to reduce your child's stress and anxiety

- 1) Encourage your child to face his/her fears, not run away from them.
- 2) Tell your child that it is okay to be imperfect.
- 3) Focus on the positives.
- 4) Schedule relaxing activities.
- 5) Model approach behavior, self-care, and **positive-thinking**.
- 6) Reward your child's brave behaviors.
- 7) Encourage good sleep hygiene.
- 8) Encourage your child to express his/her anxiety.
- 9) Help your child to problem solve.
- 10) Stay calm.
- 11) Practice relaxation exercises with your child.
- 12) Never give up!

Source: medicinenet, youramazingbrain, bbbgeorgia, psychologytoday