

Stress and school

Issues with school can have a major effect on young people and can often leave them feeling overwhelmed or stressed. While this is the case, it's important to note that there are two kinds of stress - good stress and not so helpful stress.

The physical experience of stress may include increased sweating, dilated pupils, increased respiration (quick shallow breathing), and they may feel unwell in the stomach. A degree of these physical experiences are normal and okay. However if they're finding they cannot concentrate or feel too overwhelmed to take in new information it can be a sign that this stress is not helpful. It is at this point that young people should be encouraged to seek help from their parents, teachers or a health professional.

Strategies that young people can use to manage stress at school

- **Take time to study**

The exam period can be a particularly stressful time, so encourage them to set time aside to study, which in turn can help reduce their stress and anxiety. To reduce exam pressure, encourage them to have a good balance between social life and study time; plan rewards for after exams; study actively and do past exam papers; develop and stick to a study routine at home.

- **Exercise your mood**

Physical exercise is good for our mental health and for our brain. Studies have suggested that any activity, from walking around the block to yoga to cycling, could contribute to improving the symptoms of depression and anxiety and can help young people feel less stressed.

- **Positive self-talk**

The way that we talk to ourselves, that voice inside of our head, has a huge impact on our outlook, our motivation and dedication to ourselves and our lives. With practice young people can change their self-talk by rethinking negative self-talk. Positive self-talk has the potential to change perspectives, attitudes, and reactions in regard to yourself, others and your circumstances. This can then increase confidence and reduce stress, and can be a very effective way to prepare for a big exam or event.

- **Use relaxation techniques**

There are many different relaxation techniques young people can use to cope with stress. When young people feel like everything is getting too much, encourage them to try breathing techniques, such as deep breathing or focused breathing (breathing in through the nose and as they breathe out say a positive statement to themselves like 'relax' or 'calm down'). If done correctly, young people should find that their body calms down and relaxes. This can be very helpful to calm nerves before an exam. **Check out the web and app based program Smiling Mind for help with breathing and other relaxation techniques: smilingmind.com.au**

- **Eating**

Some studies suggest that what you eat affects your mood. A good, balanced diet will make sure young people have all the essential nutrients needed for their brain to function well, helping to keep them both physically and mentally healthy. Young people may get tired when studying a lot, but eating junk food and drinking excessive caffeine can interfere with their ability to concentrate and get adequate sleep.

- **Connect with others**

We are social creatures, and social relationships are really important to our general wellbeing. It is okay for young people to take time out for themselves, but ensure they don't stay shut in for long periods as that will likely make them feel worse. Encourage your young person to keep their social relations strong when they are feeling stressed out, overwhelmed or depressed, as their friends and family can help them through these times.

- **Get some sleep**

A good night's sleep is vital for our mental and emotional wellbeing. Sleep disruptions can increase negative thinking and heighten our stress levels. Try to encourage your young person to maintain a regular sleep-and-wake schedule. Encourage them to use the bedroom for its core purposes and avoid using distracting and stimulating devices such as a television or electronic devices when they are in bed.

- **Avoid alcohol and drugs**

Some people use drugs or alcohol to help them cope during tough times but this usually exacerbates their problems and also doesn't help them develop skills that can help them cope in the long term. Drugs, including alcohol, can contribute to, or trigger, mental health problems in people. Mental illnesses linked to drug use include anxiety, depression, paranoia, panic attacks, and psychosis. If a young person drinks alcohol or takes drugs when they're trying to study, they'll be more tired and less focused which could lead to an increase in stress when it comes to exam time.

- **Help seeking**

A problem can sometimes be too hard to solve alone - or even with friends and family - so it's important to seek professional help when needed. If you think your young person needs additional support, you can encourage them to see your family doctor, psychiatrist, nurse, psychologist, social worker or counsellor. At school, they could also talk to a trusted teacher or staff in Student Services who can provide advice or direct them to the right person if they need further help. Discuss with your young person about being honest regarding when they may need support and let them know that they don't need to be afraid to find someone to talk to - it might feel scary to them at the start but it gets easier over time.

For more information and tips see headspace.org.au, reachout.com, raisingchildren.net.au