



Social, Emotional, Mental Health

How does stress and anxiety impact on our bodies?

We all know what it's like to feel stressed or anxious, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. When we say things like, "This is stressful," or, "I'm stressed," we might be talking about:

- Situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens.
- Our reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with.

There are varying medical definitions of stress, and health care professionals often disagree over whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them. This can make it difficult for you to work out what causes your feelings of stress, or how to deal with them. But whatever your personal definition of stress is, it's likely that you can learn to manage your stress better by:

1. Managing external pressures so that stressful situations don't seem to happen to you quite so often
2. Developing your emotional resilience so that you're better at coping with tough situations when they do happen and don't feel quite so stressed

Why does stress and anxiety affect me physically?

You might find that your first clues about being stressed are physical signs, like tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

This could be because when we feel stressed emotionally, our bodies release hormones called cortisol and adrenaline.

This is the body's automatic way of preparing to respond to a threat (sometimes called the 'fight or flight' response). If you're often stressed then you're probably producing high levels of these hormones, which can make you feel physically unwell.

Watch for signs of stress or anxiety:

You can learn to identify signs of stress and anxiety in yourself by listening to your body.

Children and young people who experience stress or anxiety may:

- worry a lot
- feel tense
- get lots of headaches and stomach pains
- not sleep well
- be irritable
- lose interest in food or eat more than normal
- not enjoy activities they previously enjoyed
- seem negative and low in their mood

Calming strategies to use at home:

Build in 'Gap Time'

Pick three points in your day (maybe breakfast, lunch and before bedtime) to connect to your body and listen. Sit still and think about each body part individually (head, jaw, shoulders etc). While doing this, breathe in and out deeply and slowly. Take your time and feel the tension drift away.

Exercise

Take time out of your day to be active. Whether that be walking the dog, yoga stretches or playing games such as football or netball, 20 minutes of exercise can have a big impact on our body and our mind

Turn it off!

Studies show that screen time, especially before bedtime, can make sleeping more challenging and increase our stress and worries. By doing something relaxing, such as reading, in the hour before bedtime, it will help us to sleep better and relax.

Talk through your day

It is always helpful to discuss the day with someone you are close to. This includes both the best parts of the day and the parts which were less enjoyable. A problem shared is definitely a problem halved! By talking through problems, you can often identify things you could do to improve a situation.

Learn to breathe

Practice deep breathing techniques such as breathing in slowly while counting to 5; hold your breath for 5 seconds before slowly breathing out for 5 seconds. Repeat this 10 times when you are feeling worried or stressed, concentrating on nothing else except for the rising and falling of your chest and stomach with every breath. Allow your breath to be the focus of your thoughts.

Think Positive

Use affirmations – positive strands of thought put into words – to help boost your self-confidence. By repeating ‘I am a kind, loving person,’ ten times a day, you will slowly begin to notice a confidence change. Say it and believe it for it to become true!

Spend time in nature

Going outdoors can help relieve stress naturally. Even just 5 minutes a day is proven to improve mood by boosting positive hormones in the body.

Declutter

Regain control of a messy bedroom by having a good tidy up. Mess creates confusion and a loss of power. By clearing out old toys you could bring someone else joy and make space in your room. Tidy your toys and consoles away to have clear space which will create a sense of calm.

Top tips for parents

Help your child eat well

A balanced diet is vital for your child's health, and can help them to feel well both physically and mentally. Some parents find that too many high-fat, high-sugar and high-caffeine foods and drinks (such as cola, sweets, chocolate, burgers and chips) make their children hyperactive, irritable and moody.

Where possible, involve your child in shopping for food and encourage them to choose some healthy snacks.



Help your child get enough sleep:

- Good sleep will improve thinking and concentration as well as reduce anxiety and stress levels in the body.
- Most 10 and 11 year olds need between 9 and 11 hours sleep a night.
- Allow an hour or so for children to wind down between studying, watching TV or using a computer and going to bed to help them get a good night's sleep.
- Create a sleep friendly environment before bedtime such as darkening the room and creating a clear 'bedtime routine' which the child can then adapt as they become more independent with age.

How much sleep does my child need?

AGE GROUP

HOURS PER NIGHT

Infants 4 - 12 months old

12 - 16 hours per 24 hour period

Children 1 - 2 years old

11 - 14 hours per 24 hour period

Children 3 - 5 years old

10 - 13 hours per 24 hour period

Children 6 - 12 years old

9 - 12 hours per 24 hour period

Teens 13 - 18 years old

8 - 10 hours per 24 hours

Naps included, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics



Encourage exercise

Exercise is proven to improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety. Whether this be stretches through yoga, walking the dog or a more cardiovascular activity, just 20 minutes of physical activity a day will have a positive impact on your child. This exercise can be conducted either inside or outside: being outdoors in nature has a positive impact on our bodies both physically and mentally.

Continue to talk to your child

Children can benefit from having designated times within the day to talk to a chosen adult. Engaging in conversation around your child's day (what activities they have done, what they did at playtime etc) can open opportunities for deeper conversation and to build emotional resilience through problem solving together.

Further resources and support:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/>

<http://www.worcschildrenfirst.org.uk/>

<https://www.sebda.org/sebd/parents/>