

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at what stress is, what causes it and how it might feel to be suffering from stress. It also gives some practical advice about how to cope with different types of stress.



Introduction

What is stress?

Everyone feels stressed at times. You may feel under pressure, worried, tense, upset, sad, angry – or maybe a mixture of uncomfortable feelings. There are many ordinary situations that can make you feel stressed. For example, your school work may pile up, preparing for exams may seem as if it's taking forever, you may be being teased or bullied at school, or having problems with teachers. At home you may be arguing with parents, brothers or sisters, or close friends.

Stress can be even worse if your family is breaking up, someone close to you is ill or dies, or if you are being physically or sexually abused.

The effects of stress

Stress can affect you physically. Your body is designed to be able to cope with stresses such as danger, illness and emergencies. This is called your 'fight or flight' instinct, where hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol gear your body up to cope with immediate stressful situations. For example, if you accidentally step into the road when a car is coming, adrenaline will pump around your body enabling you to jump out of the way of the car – this is your 'flight' instinct coming into play in a short-lived stressful situation. Your body is less able to cope with longer-lasting pressure. This can make you feel tired, make you go off your food and find it difficult to sleep. You may get stomach-aches or headaches.

Stress can affect you mentally as well as physically. You may find it hard to keep your mind on your work, to cope with frustration or to control your temper. You might get depressed. Stress that goes on for a long time can be exhausting.

Understanding and support from other people can make it much easier to cope. If you have someone you can trust to talk to, this can help. Feeling alone makes it harder.

Coping with stress

There are several things that you can do to help yourself cope. For things that happen every day, it can be useful to think of your stress as a puzzle to be solved:

- Think about the situations that stress you, and how you behave.
- Think about how you could behave differently in these situations, so that you would feel more in control.
- Imagine how other people might behave if you acted differently.
- List all the things you can think of that would make life easier or less stressful – write them down on a piece of paper. This can help you sort things out in your head.

Where can I get help?

Sometimes stress gets on top of you. Especially when the situation causing the stress goes on and on, and the problems just seem to keep building up. You can feel trapped, as if there is no way out and no solution to your problems. If you feel like this, it is important to get help.

People you might want to talk to:

- parents, a family member or family friend
- a close friend or carer
- a school nurse, teacher or school counsellor
- a social worker or youth counsellor

Sources of further information

- ChildLine provides a free and confidential telephone service for children. Helpline 0800 1111; www.childline.org.uk; helpline 0800 1111.
- The Samaritans provide a 24-hour service offering confidential emotional support to anyone who is in crisis. Helpline 08457 909090 (UK), 1850 609090 (ROI); e-mail: jo@samaritans.org; www.samaritans.org.uk.
- Youth Access offers information, advice and counselling throughout the UK. 12 Taylor's Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London SW12 8AB; tel. 020 8772 9900.
- The YoungMinds Parents' Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA. Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.

Or try these websites:

www.teenagehealthfreak.org
www.rethink.org/at-ease
www.peersupport.co.uk
www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental
www.active.org.uk
www.channel4.com/health/stress

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

- a priest, someone from your church or temple
- the Samaritans (telephone 08457 909090).

Your general practitioner or practice nurse may also be able to help. They may suggest that you see someone from your local child and adolescent mental health service – a team of professionals specially trained to work with young people. They include child and adolescent psychiatrists (see Factsheet 31 about child and adolescent psychiatrists), psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists and specialist nurses.

You should get help if ...

- You feel that stress is affecting your health
- You feel so desperate that you think about stopping school, running away or harming yourself
- You feel low, sad, tearful, or that life is not worth living
- You lose your appetite and find it difficult to sleep

- You have worries, feelings and thoughts that are hard to talk about because you feel people won't understand you or will think you are 'weird'
- stress is making you hear voices telling you what to do, or making you behave strangely.

It is possible that you are depressed rather than stressed if you feel these things (see Factsheet 34 on Depression). If so, it is very important that you get specialist help as soon as possible. Your general practitioner will be able to help.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (eds) (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.