

IS YOUR CHILD STRESSED OUT?

Everyone experiences stress. Stress is how the body handles life's challenges—chemicals are released to increase certain bodily processes and decrease others so we can react quickly and effectively during dangerous or high-pressure situations. Sometimes being under stress can lead to good results for your child or teen, even if it makes them uncomfortable at the moment. For instance, cramming for a test can be stressful, but lead to a better grade. Or the stress of being down a few goals in a soccer game can cause a surge in performance to score more points. These stress reactions usually don't last long, and your child or teen's body can return to normal relatively quickly. But if stress doesn't let up, then the body doesn't get the break it needs – and mental and physical health can be affected.

While most kids and teens aren't dealing with bills, difficult bosses, and frustrating commutes, there are plenty of situations that can cause them stress. Some stress may seem just a part of growing up, but there are also children and teens who are dealing with more serious stressors.

48% of 11-17 year olds surveyed by MHA felt that they were **VERY** stressed out.

WHAT IS STRESSING CHILDREN AND TEENS THE MOST?

Mental Health America surveyed 11-17 year olds who came to MHAScreening.org about what was stressing them out. Here are the top 5 things that caused them stress.

76%
**GETTING
GOOD GRADES**

76%
**PREPARING
FOR THE
FUTURE**

68%
LONELINESS

62%
**BODY
APPEARANCE**

61%
**JUGGLING
PRIORITIES**
(School, sports,
jobs, clubs, etc.)

SIGNS OF STRESS

Survey takers said they knew their stress levels were getting out of control when they experienced wanting to be alone, wanting to sleep all the time, and/or losing their temper quickly.

Here are some other things to look out for in your child or teen that signal they are feeling stressed-out:

- Headaches or other unexplained aches and pains
- More frequent visits to the school nurse
- Getting colds more than usual
- Feeling sad or moody
- Seeming "burned out"
- Sounding defeated when talking about challenges
- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Fighting with family and friends
- Trouble thinking clearly
- Acting nervous or anxious

If your child or teen has one or more of these symptoms, be alert. They could be signs of a physical illness coming on. If not, it's time to find out what is happening in your child or teen's life, and whether they are getting stressed out. Get tips for talking to your child or teen at bit.ly/startmhconvo.

HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS MANAGE STRESS

You might not be able to stop what is stressing your child or teen, but you can help them. If you notice that they're showing signs of stress, try the following:

REMINDE THEM TO BE KIND TO THEMSELVES.

No one is perfect. No one gets it right all the time. No one always has all the answers. If they are trying hard and doing their best, that's what is important.

HELP THEM MANAGE THEIR TIME.

If they feel overwhelmed with all that they need to get done, help them to set a schedule and set small goals and break down tasks into manageable chunks. If they still feel overwhelmed, it may be necessary to cut out some activities.

DON'T FORGET THE BASICS.

Feed them healthy foods, and limit caffeine and sugar. Encourage them to go to bed by a certain time so they get enough sleep for the following day.

LOOKOUT FOR SIGNS OF SUBSTANCE USE.

Teens especially may turn to drugs, alcohol, or vaping to cope with stress. If you find out that your child or teen has, remind them that substances won't solve anything and may lead to bigger problems, and keep a close eye on their behavior.

LET THEM KNOW IT'S OK TO "LET IT OUT."

They may need to cry or have a good laugh. Laughing and crying can both help release the feeling of pent up emotions.

HELP THEM RELAX.

Relaxing is essential for everybody's physical and mental health. Find out what really helps them relax and encourage them to spend at least half an hour each day doing it. It might be curling up with a good book, going on a bike ride, or listening to music.

TELL THEM YOU LOVE THEM.

Children and teens may stress themselves out because they feel as though they need your approval. It's important that they know you will love them no matter what.

REMINDE THEM THAT IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP.

No one should suffer in silence and knowing when to ask for help is a strength, not a weakness. Make sure they know that you are there to talk if they need you and be open to finding additional help through school counselors or mental health professionals if problems with stress continue.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you have worked with your child or teen to help them manage their stress, but they still seem to be struggling, they may be experiencing the early signs of a mental health condition.

HALF OF ALL MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS START BY AGE 14.¹

Take the parent screen at **MHAScreening.org** to see if your child or teen may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

¹Kessler, R. C., Chiu, W. T., Demler, O., Merikangas, K. R., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of general psychiatry*, 62(6), 617–627. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.617

IS YOUR CHILD LONELY?

**NEARLY
HALF**

*of Americans report
often feeling alone (46%)
or left out (47%).¹*

CHILDREN AND TEENS ARE NO EXCEPTION.

**OVER
2/3**

*of 11-17 year olds surveyed
by MHA felt stressed out
about loneliness.*

EFFECTS OF LONELINESS

Research shows that chronic loneliness has the following effects:²

- Increased levels of cortisol, the stress hormone
- Less restful sleep
- Negative impact on physical health (more than smoking or obesity)
- Headaches or other unexplained aches and pains
- Poor self-care (grooming, hygiene, diet)
- Higher likelihood of alcohol or drug use
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Negative outlook on life
- Poor self esteem
- Greater risk of suicide

Furthermore, the same part of the brain that reacts to physical pain is activated by social rejection.³

COMMON CAUSES OF LONELINESS

Certain life circumstances may cause children and teens to feel lonely, such as:

- ▶ Moving to a new neighborhood
- ▶ Changing schools
- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ An older sibling leaving home
- ▶ Being "single" when their friends have boyfriends or girlfriends
- ▶ Fights with friends
- ▶ Being bullied
- ▶ Death in the family

SIGNS OF LONELINESS

YOUNGER CHILDREN MAY:

- ▶ Create imaginary friends to make up for lack of real friends
- ▶ Seem clingy or start asking you to play with them more than usual
- ▶ Seek your attention by misbehaving, acting silly, or interrupting you when they know they shouldn't
- ▶ Act timid or unsure of themselves
- ▶ Cry more often than other children their age

ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS MAY:

- ▶ Retreat to their rooms for long periods of time
- ▶ Start talking to you more than usual
- ▶ Seem sad
- ▶ Appear to not have friends to hang out with outside of school
- ▶ No longer hang out with friends that they used to spend a lot of time with
- ▶ Talk negatively about themselves

By contrast, if your child or teen seems to be spending a lot of time alone, they may not actually be lonely. There are some children and teens who enjoy reading or popping in a pair of earbuds to listen to music over trips to the mall or parties. The easiest way to figure out if your child or teen is just introverted or whether they are lonely is to ask.

GOING ONLINE: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Most people who are parents and teachers didn't grow up using the internet the way children and teens do now. Between social media, gaming, and general internet use, there are a lot of ways that being online can impact loneliness, for better or for worse.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Fifty-seven percent of teens say they have met a new friend online and 68% of teen social media users said they received support from others during challenging or tough times.⁴ However, not all social media use is good for teen friendships.

While less than a quarter (24%) of teens find social media to have a mostly negative effect on their lives, 27% of those say that social media has caused them to be bullied or affected by rumor spreading, which can cause loneliness.⁵ Another study found that of teens who use social media, 53% said they saw people posting about events that they weren't invited to.⁶

GAMING

If your child or teen seems to be spending a lot of time gaming, they may actually be socializing in their own way. While virtual friendships can never replace face-to-face interactions, many teens go online to communicate with existing friends outside of school and make new friends.

Both boys and girls say that they have met new friends while playing games online, with over 4x as many boys doing so than girls. Furthermore, 78% of teen gamers say that playing online makes them feel closer to friends that they already know.⁷

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

If you suspect that your child or teen is struggling with loneliness, the best way to figure out for certain is to start a conversation and ask. If loneliness is a problem, here are some things you can do to help:

Talk to them about their interests. Find out what they enjoy and then look into groups or classes that they may be able to join to further explore those interests.

Try recreational sports. Rec sports teams give your child or teen the chance to meet a group of their peers that may not necessarily go to the same school as them.

See what your faith community has to offer. There may be youth groups or classes during worship services that your child or teen could become part of.

Make time for extended family. If your child or teen has cousins or other relatives around their age that are within a reasonable distance, set up time for them to get together.

Talk to their teachers. See if they may be able to facilitate more small group interactions during class that might help your child or teen make friends or match them up with someone to sit with at lunch time.

Leverage your own friends. If your friends or coworkers have children or teens, organize a time for them to meet with you and bring their child so both adults and children can socialize. This could be just a visit to one another's homes, a meal out at a restaurant, or a trip to a local event or attraction.

Consult with a therapist. If you think that your child or teen is lonely because they struggle with social skills, a therapist can help.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

Long-term loneliness can lead to the development of mental health conditions like anxiety or depression if not addressed early. If you suspect that your child or teen is already experiencing signs of a mental health condition, take the parent screen at **MHAScreening.org**.

It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with information and resources to help guide you through next steps.

SOURCES

¹<https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america>

²<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/teenage-isolation/>

³<https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2011/03/22/1102693108.abstract>

⁴Teens, Technology & Friendships (Pew Research Center 2015)

⁵Teens, Social Media, Technology (Pew Research Center 2018)

⁶Teens, Technology & Friendships (Pew Research Center 2015)

⁷Ibid.

ARE YOU STRESSED OUT?

Sometimes being young isn't all that great. Your parents are getting on your case, and your friends are being weird or maybe you just feel like you have too much to do and not enough time to do it.

Now your stomach hurts, you can't concentrate in school, and the smallest things get on your nerves. You're probably stressed out.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a reaction that you feel in response to pressures in your life.

You are taking a test. You find yourself in an unfamiliar situation. You're rushing from one thing to the next. In each case, the pressure is on and you may feel the effects in your mind and body. That's stress.

Not all stress is bad.

Stress can rev you up and give you more energy to handle a situation. That's the way that your body makes sure you will come out ok. Stress is a normal part of life, especially when you are going through lots of changes or aren't sure about how things will turn out.

Stress can become a bad thing when you feel it all the time.

This means that your body is working extra hard and isn't getting the break it needs to recover.

HOW DOES STRESS FEEL?

Learning how your body reacts when you become stressed and looking for those signs in the future can help you reduce the physical effects.

Here are the common signs of stress:

- Feeling angry, irritable or easily frustrated
- Trouble sleeping or wanting to sleep all the time
- Losing your temper with others
- Headaches or other unexplained aches and pains
- Changes in appetite or eating habits
- Getting colds more than usual
- Fighting with family and friends
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- Feeling sad or moody
- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Feeling that you can't handle life's challenges
- Not wanting to be around people or take part in activities

If you're having any of these symptoms, it's important that you take care of yourself.

WHAT IS STRESSING PEOPLE OUT MOST?

Mental Health America surveyed 11-17 year olds who came to MHAScreening.org about what was stressing them out. Here are the top 5 things that caused them stress.

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LONELINESS



62%

**BODY
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61%

**JUGGLING
PRIORITIES**

(School, sports,
jobs, clubs, etc.)



WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT STRESS?

You might not be able to change what is stressing you out, but you can control how you react and respond to stress. If you notice that you're showing signs of stress, here are some things you can do to help yourself:

LEAVE THE ROOM.

Getting up and removing yourself from the stressful situation can be a huge help. A brief change of scenery can help put some distance between you and your feelings. If you're in class, take a quick walk to the bathroom. Buried in homework? Take 60 seconds to walk to the kitchen for a glass of water.

ORGANIZE.

Pick something small: your desk, your closet, or your to-do list are all great choices. Spend 20 minutes focused on tidying up—it will help you feel in control of something and give you a sense of accomplishment.

DO SOME BREATHING EXERCISES.

Think about how you breathe when you're relaxed—like when you're about to fall asleep. Slow and deep, right? Forcing yourself to breathe this way is one of the best ways to bring on calmer feelings. Breathe2Relax and Breath are two good apps for guided breathing exercises.

EXERCISE.

One of the best ways to handle built-up stress is to physically release it.¹ Lace up your sneakers and head outside for a run—your feet pounding against the ground is sure to help you get some frustration out.

WRITE DOWN 3 THINGS YOU ARE GRATEFUL FOR.

Showing gratitude is known to improve mood and help you better handle adversity²—so not only is it a good way to reduce your immediate stress, but it can help you keep your future stress level down, too. And when you write down a few things you're thankful for, you can always look back at your list when you start to feel that stress bubbling up again.

TALK IT OUT.

Sometimes when we're stressed, everything little problem seems like a big deal. Talking to a friend, parent, teacher, coach, or someone else you trust can help you get out of your own head and see things from a different point of view. Try using the NotOK app to help you reach out to others when you're feeling overly stressed. Visit bit.ly/tips4talking for tips on how to start the conversation.

WRITE IT OUT.

When your feelings start to bubble up and get overwhelming, putting them on paper can help you untangle them. Try a stream of consciousness exercise: 10 minutes of writing down all your thoughts without hesitating. Or make a list of things stressing you out—seeing them reduced to bullet points can help you think more clearly.

MEDITATE.

Meditation triggers your body's "relaxation response"—the complete opposite of the common stress response of "fight or flight." It slows your breathing, blood pressure, and pulse—all things that go along with being in a calm state of mind. Some apps you can try to help you meditate are Calm, Sanvello, and Headspace.

WATCH SOMETHING FUNNY.

Putting on a funny show or video will help take your mind off of everything going on for a little bit. And laughter really can be the best medicine! It's known to reduce stress hormones,³ improve mood,⁴ and bring on feelings of relaxation.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and feel as though your stress is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at MHAScreening.org to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

¹<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/exercising-to-relax>

²<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

³JongEun Yim. (2016). Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review. The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine. 239(3): 243-249.

⁴<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/indepth/stress-relief/art-20044456>.

LONELINESS IS HARD

**OVER
2/3**

**of 11-17 year olds surveyed
by MHA felt stressed out
about loneliness.**



**IT'S NORMAL TO FEEL
LONELY SOMETIMES.**

COMMON REASONS TO FEEL LONELY

- ▶ Moving to a new neighborhood
- ▶ Changing schools
- ▶ Your parents are getting a divorce
- ▶ Your older brother or sister moved out
- ▶ All your friends have boyfriends or girlfriends and you don't (yet!)
- ▶ Fights with friends
- ▶ Being bullied
- ▶ Seeing posts on social media about activities you weren't invited to

EFFECTS OF LONELINESS

When you're lonely a lot, it can affect you in many ways. You might:

- ▶ Feel more stressed;
- ▶ Sleep, but not feel rested;
- ▶ Stop taking good care of your appearance or hygiene;
- ▶ Find that your outlook on life has become negative;
- ▶ Start showing signs of depression or anxiety; or
- ▶ Turn to drugs or alcohol to feel better.



**YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE
ALONE TO FEEL LONELY.**

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you take steps to feel less lonely but find yourself still struggling to deal with day-to-day life, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

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10 THINGS YOU CAN DO IF YOU'RE LONELY

HELP OTHERS.

Volunteering is a great way to form meaningful connections with others and make new friends. It is also a natural way to add some purpose to your life—something a lot of us struggle with when feeling lonely. What are some causes that you're passionate about? Does your place of worship have volunteer activities? Is there a service club through your school?

RECONNECT WITH OLD FRIENDS.

Have you lost touch with a good friend from elementary school? Or maybe a friend from summer camp? See if you can reconnect! Especially if you're at a new school this year—just because you don't see someone every day doesn't mean they can't be a valuable friend.

TRY SOMETHING NEW.

Is there something you've always wanted to try, but never have? Now is the perfect time! If you're interested in acting, try auditioning for a school play or a local theater group. Love sports? Join a new team, or maybe there's a weekend clinic you can sign up for. There are tons of potential new hobbies out there!

FIGURE OUT IF SOMETHING IS MISSING IN YOUR LIFE.

There are a lot of different ways to feel lonely. Maybe you have a great group of friends, but wish you had one best friend to go to for everything. Or maybe you have one amazing friend, but miss being part of a group. Knowing what's missing won't magically make it appear, but it will make the overwhelming feeling of loneliness seem a bit more manageable and give you something to work toward.

MAKE TIME FOR EXTENDED FAMILY.

If you have cousins or other relatives around your age that are within a reasonable distance, reach out and try to get together.

WATCH SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU LAUGH.

Put on your favorite funny show or movie—immersing yourself in a world with familiar characters can make you feel less alone.

TURN ACTIVITIES YOU DO ALONE INTO GROUP ACTIVITIES.

Into gaming? Invite someone over to play with you in person. Do you like to draw? Ask your parents to help you find an art class. Going to a baseball game with your family? See if they can get an extra ticket so you can invite a friend.

SPEND TIME WITH ANIMALS.

Hanging out with pets, especially cats and dogs, is a great way to feel less lonely. They will love you unconditionally and will provide you with all the snuggles you need! If you don't have pets of your own, see if your neighbors or relatives would be willing to let you hang out with theirs.

TRY AN APP.

Lyf is an app that helps you reach out to others to chat about things. Q Chat has support groups for LGBTQ youth. NotOK is an app that helps you reach out to contacts that you select to let them know that you are struggling. 7 Cups has trained listeners to provide you with emotional support.

WRITE DOWN 5 THINGS YOU LOVE ABOUT YOURSELF.

Part of the pain of loneliness is that you start to think of yourself negatively. Taking a few minutes to write down the good things you notice about yourself is a simple way to boost your self-esteem and remind yourself that you are awesome in your own way.

IN CRISIS?



Trained crisis counselors are available 24/7 by texting "MHA" to 741-741 or calling 1-800-273-TALK(8255).



HOW DOES STRESS FEEL?

COMMON SIGNS OF STRESS INCLUDE:

- **FEELING ANGRY, IRRITABLE OR EASILY FRUSTRATED**
- **TROUBLE SLEEPING OR WANTING TO SLEEP ALL THE TIME**
- **LOSING YOUR TEMPER WITH OTHERS**
- **HEADACHES OR OTHER UNEXPLAINED ACHES AND PAINS**
- **CHANGES IN APPETITE OR EATING HABITS**
- **GETTING COLDS MORE THAN USUAL**
- **FIGHTING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS**
- **TROUBLE CONCENTRATING OR THINKING CLEARLY**
- **FEELING SAD OR MOODY**
- **FEELING NERVOUS OR ANXIOUS**
- **FEELING THAT YOU CAN'T HANDLE LIFE'S CHALLENGES**
- **NOT WANTING TO BE AROUND PEOPLE OR TAKE PART IN ACTIVITIES**

If you feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and feel as though your stress is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

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ALONE TO FEEL LONELY.***



WHEN YOU'RE LONELY A LOT, IT CAN AFFECT YOU IN MANY WAYS. YOU MIGHT:

- ▶ **FEEL MORE STRESSED;**
- ▶ **SLEEP, BUT NOT FEEL RESTED;**
- ▶ **STOP TAKING GOOD CARE OF YOUR APPEARANCE OR HYGIENE;**
- ▶ **FIND THAT YOUR OUTLOOK ON LIFE HAS BECOME NEGATIVE;**
- ▶ **START SHOWING SIGNS OF DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY; OR**
- ▶ **TURN TO DRUGS OR ALCOHOL TO FEEL BETTER.**

If you take steps to feel less lonely but find yourself still struggling to deal with day-to-day life, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

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