Stress, Sleep & Relaxation

Dealing With Stress

Everyday adolescents experience stress in a variety of ways. Stress can be good (eustress) or bad (distress) depending on the situation and the individual’s outlook. Stress can occur suddenly (acute) or develop and continue over time (chronic). A person may be stressed out and think negatively of a situation, while another person may enjoy and embrace the same situation. It is important to recognize what exactly is causing your stress. It may be schoolwork, sports, relationships, or even the bright green color of the heading on this page. Studies suggest the two highest stress environments for adolescents are school and home. A good way to minimize stress after recognizing the stressor is to deal with it right away and not let it build up. This may mean seeking counseling/advice from a professional or trustworthy adult and/or focusing on completing tasks that are causing stress. Sleep and relaxation can also reduce stress; these are discussed in detail on the following page.

Not managing stress can have negative health effects. Adolescents respond to stress quicker than adults because the part of the brain that assesses and calls off the stress response, the prefrontal cortex, is not yet fully developed. Over time, the stress response can go on too long and wear out the immune system and leave the body feeling depleted. Distress can lead to negative symptoms and can be the precursor for future disease. It is important to avoid alcohol, tobacco and drugs when attempting to relieve stress. These substances keep the body stressed and lead to more problems. Stress is a natural function of the body, but it needs to be maintained to insure the health of an individual.

Types of Stress

- Chronic Eustress
  Good Stress
- Acute Eustress
  Good Stress
- Chronic Distress
  Bad Stress
- Acute Distress
  Bad Stress

Causes of stress for adolescents:
- School, work and sports
- Relationships
- Personal appearance/self esteem
- Illness/death
- Thinking about the future
- Bullying
- Cultural differences

Common signs of stress:
- Feeling sick
- Trouble thinking clearly
- Overly tired/exhausted/excited
- Increased heart rate
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Trouble controlling emotions

Behaviors due to stress:
- Grinding teeth
- Compulsive gum chewing
- Overly critical of others
- Alcohol/ tobacco/ drug use
- Unable to get things done
- Taking risks with negative consequences
Adolescents in today’s society struggle to receive the proper amount of sleep on a nightly basis. There are many different factors that attribute to this lack of sleep. As children grow and become teenagers, their hormones undergo different changes that affect their sleep cycle. The circadian rhythm refers to the body’s natural sleep cycle. Different factors can disrupt this natural cycle such as the presence of light. As the body senses light, the production of melatonin decreases, but increases in darkness. Melatonin is produced in the pineal gland, which is located in the center of the brain, and released into the bloodstream when the body senses darkness and thinks it’s time to sleep. After the individual sleeps and senses the presence of light, melatonin production is stopped until nighttime and the person begins to wake up. This cycle helps to create a sleep schedule.

There are different complications that can interfere with the sleep cycle. Having insufficient melatonin production can make falling asleep very difficult. Other factors include the activities performed during the day, stress and anxiety, medications taken, types of foods and drinks consumed, exposure to light before bed and the sleep environment.

Teens with sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, insomnia, restless leg syndrome and narcolepsy should be evaluated by a physician or sleep professional. Take steps to improve your sleep quality and duration. As a student, it is difficult to acquire the recommended amount of sleep (about 9 hours for teens) with the early start of most schools. It is difficult to get to sleep at an earlier hour during the school week after staying up over the weekend. Thus, going to bed around the same time every night will make falling asleep easier. Make sure not to stimulate the mind before bed. Avoid bright lights, put away the electronics and try to wind down. This way the body will sense this routine and prepare for sleep. Also, create a cool, calm and comfortable sleep environment.

The body needs sleep and relaxation to recharge and perform at an optimum level. If you miss sleep during the week, make up those lost hours on the weekends but make sure to continue to go to bed at the same time everyday if possible. A study performed on 3,000 high school students showed that students with A’s and B’s obtained 25 minutes of more sleep and went to bed 40 minutes earlier than students receiving C’s, D’s and F’s. Being well rested decreases negative, depressing feelings and increases attentiveness, energy and the overall ability to perform well in the classroom.

Breathing Mediation for Relaxation:

1. Sit comfortably on a pillow or in a chair with your back upright. Rest one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. The hand on your stomach should move more than the other hand when breathing. Close your eyes or look down to avoid distractions.

2. Breathe in deep through your nose and out of your mouth. Continue to do this in a steady, slow rhythm and allow the exhale to last twice as long as the inhale.

3. Focus on using your diaphragm and stomach. This relieves the stress we put on our upper body when breathing. Continue to steadily breathe.

4. Take a pause from breathing. Clinch your fist tightly and feel the tension. Relax and focus on the difference between tension and relaxation. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly.

5. Think about how calm and relaxed you are and continue breathing. Clinch your feet and take a final deep breathe. As you exhale, relax your feet and open your eyes. You should feel more relaxed now.