

# KIDS, TEENS AND STRESS

*The Centre of Health and Functional Medicine*  
*By Heather H. Christensen, PA-C*

## INTRO

Stress affects all ages. The effects of prolonged stress and unhealthy coping strategies are increasingly apparent in our children at younger ages. Parents can learn to better recognize signs of poor coping and practice with their children how to manage stress in healthy ways while working together to reduce stressors. As a community, we can support one another by sharing ideas and creating opportunities for communication among our children and ourselves.

## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

1. All stress is not bad, we are designed to have both stress and recovery every day. Our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems control our body's responses. Children experience stress differently, in part, because the pre-frontal cortex (our rational mind) isn't fully developed. Perception = reality.
2. Stress is the Sympathetic response - Fight or Flight. It preserves your life (gets you safe from the bear). Meanwhile shutting down non-life saving organs such as reproductive, digestive, reparative processes.
3. Restoration comes through the Parasympathetic response - once the danger is over this system is able to nourish, repair and calm the body.
4. Chronic daily stress - being in Fight or Flight all the time, causes physiologic changes as our body tries to compensate for not being allowed to repair itself.
5. See the video for ideas on drawing a representation of the stress response.

## HOW TO TELL IF YOUR CHILD IS STRESSING

1. Physical Stressors - Sleep deprivation, chronic illness, injury, regular intense exercise, food: over or under-eating, food sensitivities.
2. Psychological Stressors - School, work, relationships, guilt, shame, remorse, betrayal, abandonment, social isolation, emotional trauma (real or perceived). "Perception is Reality."
3. The Stress Response –
  - *Immediate* - Increase blood sugars, Increase blood pressure, increased alertness, changes in appetite, nausea, increased energy, less need for sleep, feeling on-edge, hypersensitive, jittery, unable to focus, agitated, restless.
  - *Prolonged* - lost resilience, anxiety, depression, frequent illness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, emotional sensitivity, frequent illness, headaches, tiredness. Worsening of chronic conditions such as allergies, asthma, rashes. Difficulty sleeping, restlessness, poor memory, anger, losing interest, feeling overwhelmed or out-of-control, difficulty organizing and finishing tasks, stomach aches, constipation, changes in weight.

4. Recognizing negative coping behaviors – food cravings, avoidance, lying, angry outbursts, damaging things or themselves (cutting), relationship problems with friends/family, alcohol, caffeine, drug use, binge media watching, over or under eating, increase in risky behaviors, poor grades, missing school/work, isolation, acting out, change in personality.
5. Watch our live video to hear the observations of parents who attended our event.

## HOW TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT STRESS

1. Find the time to chat one-on-one, in the car, helping with chores or homework.
2. I've noticed that you seem \_\_\_\_, is there anything that's bothering you lately?
3. When this happens, we can feel stressed. Stress causes our body to respond in certain ways - like if you were in the woods and encountered a bear. Your heart rate and blood pressure go up. Your blood sugar goes up so you have quick energy. Your blood goes away from your gut and is sent to your muscles and your brain so that you are more aware of your surroundings and able to run away. All these things are good, and happen to save your life.
4. The problem, is when these changes stay around because we're not stressing about a bear that we can run away from, but from something else. Stress lasting a long time can make it difficult for our body to keep up and we can get sick or experience \_\_\_\_. We can learn how to help our body manage stress so that we can feel good again.
5. I've had to learn/I just took a class on how to manage stress.. I'd like to share with you what I've learned so that you can benefit from this now, and not have to wait until you're old like me to figure it out. I know it can help you feel better.

## 10 HEALTHY STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD COPE

*Pick one, practice it with your child for a few days then do another.*

1. **I can make sure my body has the food it needs to be healthy by:** Starting the day off with a good breakfast. Veggies, protein and healthy fats at each meal. Eating a colorful variety of veggies and fruit. Having regular family meal time. Vitamin D, multivitamin.
2. **I can get good sleep by:** Bright sunshine in AM. Protein and fat in breakfast. Pre-bedtime dim lights. No screens 1 hr before. No caffeine, no alcohol.
3. **I can move more by:** Walking or riding my bike to school. Going on a hike. Playing outside. Exercise directly combats the effects of stress on our body by allowing cortisol to return to normal. Excessive exercise can be harmful/more stressful – so keep a good balance.
4. **I can get outside:** “Grounding”, Sunshine- improves Vitamin. D and mood, Nature activates parasympathetic response. Being outside early in the day helps with sleep.
5. **I can interact in-person with others by:** Join a club, sports team, or play group. Spend time with family in common spaces. Learn a new skill from another person.
6. **I know who I am and where I belong:** Spiritual/belief system - personal/family identity, rules and expectations. Create a family theme or moto.
7. **I can serve others:** Altruism – discuss ways to help others, choose a small act of kindness to perform each day/week. Ask about ways your child has helped people around them.
8. **I can see the good around (and within) me:** Gratitude - seeing things with a different perspective – practice positive self-talk. Have opportunities (in the car, at dinner) where each person gets to express something they are grateful for.
9. **I can laugh more:** We remembered this at the class – laughter really is the best medicine! Watch a comedy, tell uplifting jokes, be willing to laugh at yourself when something doesn't

turn out right. Laughter stimulates the parasympathetic response, and releases endorphins (the feel good hormones).

## TECHNIQUES TO STRENGTHEN THE PARASYMPATHETIC RESPONSE

*See the video for a demonstration. Practice improves effect.*

1. Belly Breathing
2. Square Breathing
3. 4 - 8 - 2 Breathing

## WHEN TO SEEK HELP FROM A PROFESSIONAL

Situations where your child is expressing suicidal thoughts or plans as well as demonstrating harmful behaviors such as cutting or substance abuse/addiction are clear times to enlist the help of your doctor or a therapist. However, at any time if you feel that you need more individualized ideas on stress management techniques, behavioral therapy or additional help identifying underlying causes of ongoing stress your medical provider can also help.

At the Centre of Health, our medical providers offer a new perspective on treating stress by finding underlying causes, instead of simply treating the symptoms. We support you and your child by teaching you how to modify lifestyle patterns for sleep, nutrition, relationships, movement and coping with stress to find lifelong wellness.

Learn more at [www.thecentrehealth.com](http://www.thecentrehealth.com).

## Stress-Less Snacks

Find recipes at <https://www.thecentrehealth.com/single-post/2017/05/21/3-Stress-Less-Snacks-for-Summer>

**Today's snacks** – Avocados and oranges, Bell peppers and hummus, Apples and fresh Almond Butter.

## Thank you to...

Nicole Anthony, Studio 1010 - for hosting our event!

Corbin Anderson, Kennelly Keys, Anacortes - for the microphone!

Send us your Questions and feedback to [hello@thecentrehealth.com](mailto:hello@thecentrehealth.com) – we'd love to hear from you!

Best wishes,

Heather at The Centre of Health