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Maximum pressure: teens face stress every day. Here's how to calm down your life

Scholastic Choices, Sept, 2004 by Nancy Fitzgerald

SPENCER PATTERSON IS STRESSED OUT. He crawls out of bed at 6 a.m., travels an hour and a half to school, and makes his way through a day of demanding classes. His day is so full that he doesn't have time to eat lunch. After school, he attends rehearsals for school plays. And then there's the two-hour trip home.

Evenings are filled with chores, martial arts classes, and homework. Late at night he works on his comedy routines, which he performs on weekends in New York. "Sometimes I just feel overstressed," says Spencer, 15 a freshman at the Frank Sinatra School for the Arts in Queens, New York.

Welcome to Spencer's world. It's probably a little bit like yours. According to a recent study by the University of Minnesota, 39 percent of American teens report feeling stressed during a typical day.

Oh, the Pressure

"Kids today are under more stress than previous generations," says Erika Karres, PhD., a psychologist and editor of Mean Chicks, Cliques, and Dirty Tricks (Adams Media, 2004). "There are pressures from family situations and economic factors. Kids hear parents worrying about jobs. They may have responsibility for younger siblings. They're under pressure to do well in school and get into top-notch colleges. They're under stress to wear the right clothes, excel in sports, and even volunteer in their communities."

Believe it or not, stress is nothing new. Our ancestors developed a fight-or-flight reaction to danger thousands of years ago. When danger crossed their paths--a wild animal, a hostile band of warriors, or a violent storm--their bodies were flooded with natural chemicals that put them on alert. When the danger passed, the chemicals subsided, the stress was gone, and life went back to normal.

Fast-forward to the 21st century. For teens like Spencer, the stressors are different--they take the form of academic overload and family worries rather than attacks by wild boars. But the troubling thing for teens today is that often the stressors don't go away.

Body Assault

"When you experience stress, your body and brain are in a heightened state to manage whatever the event is," explains Dr. Philippe Cunningham, associate professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. "But your body needs a chance to recover. The more stressors there are--and the longer they last--the more likely you are to feel overwhelmed by them. It's like running a race that doesn't end."

All that stress can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, sweating, sleeplessness, and constant fatigue. Constant stress can lead to potentially serious conditions like irregular heartbeats and high blood pressure. Stress can also

cause emotional problems such as anxiety, anger, hostility, and depression.

Some kids turn to alcohol and drugs to help them cope with stress. "That may allow teens to escape the stress for the moment, but it doesn't help them deal with stress," Cunningham says. "Say after you get into a fight with your parents you go out and get high. You may get rid of the stress for the evening but you've still got a problem with your mom and dad. You have to learn adaptive ways to manage stress."

Stress-Busters

Spencer is working on ways to reduce his stress. For instance, math is his most challenging subject. He works with a tutor on his math assignments and asks his math-savvy friends for help after class. When he's upset and needs an outlet, Spencer often rides his bicycle or hits a punching bag in the basement of his home.

Stress Busters THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESS, HERE ARE SIX THAT MAY HELP YOU:

RELAX

The following techniques can help you calm down: deep breathing, yoga, meditation, or prayer. "Before taking a test, I tried the meditation technique they taught us at school," says Jared Williams, 14, of Detroit, Michigan. "I sat down and closed my eyes and it really helped. My grade in class went up from a D to a C."

TALK TO SOMEONE

Open up to a trusted adult--a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor. "The more you depend on yourself, the more out of control things get," says Dr. Philippe Cunningham. "You need to ask an adult for help." Expressing your feelings in a journal may also help.

WORK OUT

When you exercise, your body releases a calming hormone called endorphin. Katelyn Helgason, 17, of Grand Forks, North Dakota, has a demanding course load, household chores, homework, and a part-time job. But most evenings, she runs laps, lifts weights, or shoots baskets. "It helps me relax and sleep better at night," she says.

HAVE FUN

Take time to do things that you enjoy. The evenings of Brittany Birckett, 14, of Modesto, California, are packed with activities. But she sets aside an hour every day to grab a snack, talk on the phone, and watch TV. "It really helps me wind down," Brittany says. And on most Friday nights she goes to the movies with friends.

MANAGE YOUR TIME

"Plan ahead," says psychologist Erika Karres. "Break tasks down into manageable pieces. If you're doing a term paper, visit the library one night, take notes the second, write an outline the third."

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