

Resources for Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

CHILDREN AND STRESS

Stress is the product of the demands that are placed on us, and a normal part of life. It is not stress that kills us, it is our inability to effectively manage stress. Friends, family, jobs, or school can create stress, as well as a disconnection between what we think we should be accomplishing and what we are actually able to accomplish.

Children are not immune to stress, and if your child is feeling stress they are not alone. Some research suggests children are even more stressed than adults in these times. There are many reasons your children may encounter stress. Our Hopeful Minds program addresses stress, and provides stress management techniques, including the key 90 second rule. Our goal is to share additional insights, and provide tips on what else you might do at home.

As children grow, academic and social pressures, world news, and external trauma can become stressors at an increasing rate. The symptoms of stress can vary; however, the following list contains some of the more common symptoms typically identified in children suffering from stress:

- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Nightmares
- Trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork
- Overreacting to minor problems
- Becoming clingy
- Becoming withdrawn or spending more time alone
- Short-term behavioral changes, such as mood swings, acting out, bedwetting, and changes in sleep pattern
- Younger children may start thumb sucking, hair twirling, and nose picking
- Older children may begin lying, bullying, or defying authority
- Drastic changes in academic performance

SOLUTIONS TO STRESS

There are healthy ways to help children both cope with and minimize stressors in their lives. We've provided a number of solutions in our Hopeful Minds program, and encourage you to do it with them so they start to recognize "stress," know how it feels in their body, and proactively manage it. It isn't stress that hurts us, it is our inability to manage stress. In addition to practicing hope strategies with them, you can support your child in managing their stress in the following ways:

AT HOME

- Make sure your child is getting proper rest and nutrition. Children need a well-balanced diet and 9-12 hours of sleep each night to stay physically and mentally healthy.
- Ensure your home is a physically and emotionally safe place for your child to come home to.
- Commit to a routine.
- Monitor the amount of screen time, as well as the television, video game, and book content your child is ingesting.
- Don't overschedule. Too many extracurricular activities can increase stress.
- Take time to talk through changes with your child before they happen.
- Encourage children to perform visualization and breathing activities prior to stressful events, such as games and tests.
- Learn to listen to problems without being critical or solving the problems for them. Help your children find their own solutions to situations that are adding stress to their lives.
- At the start of conversations with your children, establish whether they want you to listen, give advice, or take action based on the information they are sharing.
- Provide affection and encouragement.
- Adopt healthy habits, such as exercise and self-care, to manage your own stress in healthy ways. Children are perceptive and will pick up on how you react to your own stressors.

AT SCHOOL

- Involve students in social, club, and athletic activities where they can succeed.
- Use positive reinforcement and methods of discipline that promote self-esteem.
- Limit homework overload.
- Take time to actively listen to students and help them find ways to decrease stressors in their lives.
- Use frequent “movement” breaks between lessons to keep students active and engaged.
- Schedule time to organize. Especially in lower grades, providing time to organize desks and cubbies, sharpen pencils, and put away toys and tools can give students a greater sense of control.
- Establish a routine and implement your own time management techniques. A hectic classroom schedule is a common stressor for students.
- Encourage students to perform visualization and breathing activities prior to stressful events, such as games and tests.
- Pay attention to behavioral changes in your students. If concerning behaviors are continually exhibited, reach out to parents and/or a counselor.
- Provide patience and encouragement.

CHILDREN AND ANXIETY

When stress is not properly mitigated, it can lead to anxiety. Anxiety disorders negatively impact a child's life in many ways. Most children have fears and worries that appear at different times during development. Although fears and worries are normal, persistent or extreme fears may be due to anxiety.

The general rule is if any of these symptoms appear for two or more weeks, and are disrupting your child's daily life and activities, it is best to seek advice from a medical professional. The following is a list of symptoms that may help you determine if your child is experiencing anxiety:

- Distress during separation
- Phobias
- Fear and discomfort in social settings
- Excessive worry about the future and bad things happening
- Abnormal irritation or anger
- Trouble sleeping and fatigue
- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected fear that come with symptoms such as heart pounding, trouble breathing, feeling dizzy, shaking, and sweating

MANAGING ANXIETY

As a parent or teacher, your goal isn't to eliminate a child's anxiety, but to help them learn to manage it. If you believe your child may have anxiety, it is important to take active steps to get your child the help they need including talking to a medical professional like your primary care doctor, or a therapist.

There is no shame in seeking support. Just as you would encourage your child to get support for heart or lung issues, kids need to feel comfortable seeking help for their brain. Mental health is a unique interplay of behavioral and biological exchange, so it is important to work on both. You can help them manage their anxiety in the following ways:

AT HOME

- Consult with your child's pediatrician or family physician. A mental health assessment and evaluation can be done for a diagnosis and treatment plan. Your doctor may refer you to a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or counselor. *(Do not delay treatment. Early detection and diagnosis are important for getting your child the help they need. Though parents or guardians can often feel responsible for what is happening with their children, they did not cause the anxiety.)*
- Respect your child's feelings but don't empower the feelings. It is important to acknowledge that their feelings are real and valid and help them find the source of the anxiety they are feeling. However, once they have acknowledged their anxiety, it is important to help children learn to face their fears. Make sure you are not reinforcing fears with your behaviors.
- Make sure your child is getting proper rest and nutrition. Children need a well-balanced diet and 9-12 hours of sleep each night to stay physically and mentally healthy.
- Ensure your home is a physically and emotionally safe place for your child to come home to.
- Commit to a routine.

- Monitor the amount of screen time, as well as the television, video game, and book content your child is ingesting.
- Practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques.
- Take time to talk through changes with your child before they happen. Preparing for upcoming changes can help remove the anxiety associated with them.
- At the start of conversations with your children, establish whether they want you to listen, give advice, or take action based on the information they are sharing.
- Help your child with problem-solving skills. Develop a plan of realistic steps your child can take toward a goal, recognize their success on the path, and encourage the enjoyment of the experience along the way. Help identify potential obstacles or difficulties and plan/talk about ways to overcome them. Focus on strengths.
- Adopt healthy habits to manage your own anxieties. Children are perceptive and will pick up on how you react to your own anxieties.
- Have conversations with your children about failure. It is important for them to understand that everyone fails at things and that when they fail, it does not mean that they are failures.

AT SCHOOL

- Use positive reinforcement and methods of discipline that promote self-esteem.
- Respect your student's feelings but don't empower the feelings. It is important to acknowledge that their feelings are valid and help them find the source of the anxiety they are feeling. However, once they have acknowledged their anxiety, it is important to help children learn to face their fears. Make sure you are not reinforcing fears with your behaviors.
- Limit homework overload.
- Take time to actively listen to students and help them find ways to decrease stressors in their lives.
- Schedule time to organize. Especially in lower grades, providing time to organize desks and cubbies, sharpen pencils, and put away toys and tools can give students a greater sense of control.

- Encourage students to face their anxieties in baby steps. Come up with techniques that allow them to participate a bit more each time.
- Establish a routine and implement your own time management techniques. A hectic classroom schedule is a common stressor for students.
- Encourage students to perform visualization and breathing activities prior to stressful events, such as games and tests.
- Pay attention to student interactions to prevent bullying and abuse within your classroom.
- Pay attention to behavioral changes in your students. If concerning behaviors are continually exhibited, check your school's policy and reach out to parents, guardians and/or a counselor.
- Provide patience and encouragement.
- Have conversations with your students about failure. It is important for them to understand that everyone fails at things and that when they fail, it does not mean that they are failures.

CHILDREN AND DEPRESSION

Depression is a serious mood disorder that can take the joy from a child's life. It is normal for a child to be moody or sad from time to time. However, if these feelings last more than two weeks, and start to interfere with daily activities, it may be a sign of clinical depression. The following list of symptoms may help you identify if a child is experiencing depression.

- Frequent sadness, or crying more often or more easily
- Poor concentration
- Increased irritability, anger, or hostility
- Hopelessness
- Decreased interest in activities, or an inability to enjoy usual activities
- Persistent boredom or low energy
- Social isolation/withdrawal: Spending more time alone, away from family and friends
- Violence towards self or others
- "Clingy" and more dependent behavior in certain relationships
- Overly pessimistic attitude or excessive guilt
- Feelings of worthlessness and extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Difficulty with relationships
- Over or under eating, or any form of addictive behavior
- Frequent complaints of physical illnesses, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- Major changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Talk of, or efforts to, run away from home
- Self-destructive behavior or self-harm
- Thoughts of death or expressions of suicide
- Increase in risk-taking behaviors and/or showing less concern for their own safety
- Younger children may act younger than their age (regression)
- Low self esteem

MANAGING DEPRESSION

Depression may look different in a child than in an adult, and therefore many children do not get the treatment they need. If you believe your child may be depressed, it is important to take active steps to get your child the help they need. You can help them manage their depression in the following ways:

AT HOME

- Consult with your child's pediatrician or family physician. A mental health assessment and evaluation can be done for a diagnosis and treatment plan. Your doctor may refer you to a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or counselor. *(Do not delay treatment. Early detection and diagnosis are important for getting your child the help they need. Though parents can often feel responsible for what is happening with their children, they did not cause the depression.)*
- Respect your child's feelings but don't empower the feelings. It is important to acknowledge that their feelings are real and valid and help them find the source of the anxiety they are feeling. However, once they have acknowledged their anxiety, it is important to help children learn to face their fears. Make sure you are not reinforcing fears with your behaviors.
- Make sure your child is getting proper rest and nutrition. Children need a well-balanced diet and 9-12 hours of sleep each night to stay physically and mentally healthy.
- Life stressors such as an illness, a separation/divorce, a move, or death can trigger short-term problems or lead to depression. Under these stressors, it is helpful for families to turn to a mental health professional. Depression is treatable, but, if left untreated, can be life threatening. Depression is a major risk factor for suicide.
- Communicate with your child's school. Teachers, school psychologists, and social workers are there to help.
- Talk to your child and listen carefully. Never dismiss feelings, but point out realities and offer hope.

- Remind your child that you are always there to help and support them. Depressed children need continual reassurance. It is common for them to feel unworthy when experiencing depression.
- Remind your child that they are important and needed.
- Encourage and be a positive role model for a healthy lifestyle. Getting proper nutrition, having adequate sleep, and exercising all help alleviate stress, build relationships, and improve mood.
- Help your child with problem-solving skills. Develop a plan of realistic steps your child can take toward a goal, recognize their success on the path, and encourage the enjoyment of the experience along the way. Help identify potential obstacles or difficulties and plan/talk about ways to overcome them. Focus on strengths.
- Never ignore statements and comments about death or suicide. Report them to your child's doctor immediately and if you believe your child is in immediate danger do not leave them alone. Contact your local emergency room in the US; or numbers at the end of this document. You may develop a safety and emergency plan of your own. Have a list of numbers ready to call.

AT SCHOOL

- Communicate with the student's parents, as well as the school psychologists and social workers.
- Talk to your student and listen carefully. Never dismiss feelings, but point out realities and offer hope.
- Use positive reinforcement and methods of discipline that promote self-esteem.
- Use frequent "movement" breaks between lessons to keep students active and engaged. Exercise can help decrease depression and increase mindfulness.
- Schedule time to organize. Especially in lower grades, providing time to organize desks and cubbies, sharpen pencils, and put away toys and tools can give students a greater sense of control.
- Establish a routine and implement your own time management techniques. A hectic classroom schedule can be an additional stressful obstacle for students to deal with.