

## A Preteen's Personalized Guide to Managing Stress

### What Is Stress?

Stress is the uncomfortable feeling you get when you're worried, scared, angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed. It is caused by emotions, but it affects your mood and body. Many adults think that kids don't have stress because they don't have to work and support a family. They are wrong!

### What Causes Stress?

Stress comes from many different places.

*From your parents.* "Hurry up, finish this, do your homework, go out for the team, practice your music, do your best, stay out of trouble, make more friends, don't ever try drugs."

*From your friends.* "Be cool, try this, show us you aren't a loser, don't hang out with those dorks."

*Even from yourself.* "I need to lose weight, wear the right clothes, get better grades, score more goals, show my parents I'm not a baby."

*And from*

- Watching parents argue
- Figuring out how to be independent
- Feeling pressure to get good grades
- Being pressured to do something, like smoking.
- Not being good enough at sports
- Worrying about how your body's changing
- Worrying about neighborhood or world problems
- Feeling guilty

### How Does the Body Handle Stress?

First, here are 2 short definitions.

- *Hormone.* A chemical made by one part of the body to send a message to the rest of the body.
- *Nervous system.* The brain, spinal cord, and all of the nerves. The nerves send messages between your brain and the rest of your body.

The body is a finely tuned machine that can change quickly to do what we need it to do, like react to stress. The body actually has 2 different sets of nerves. One works while we're relaxed, and the other works when there's an emergency. These 2 systems cannot work together at the same time. It's important to know this because we can shut off the emergency system by turning on the relaxed system. That helps us feel better!

### Is Stress Always Bad?

Even though stress makes us feel uncomfortable, it's not always a bad thing. Sometimes stress can really help us deal with tough situations. A lot of stress changes our bodies quickly and helps us react to an emergency. A little stress keeps us alert and helps us work harder.

Ages ago, when people had to survive in the jungle, the emergency nervous system was a great thing to have. Imagine your great, great, great ancestors, Sam and Zelda, eating some berries and soaking up the sun. Suddenly they saw a tiger and they knew they had to run! Hormones gave them the huge burst of energy that they needed to escape.

How did their bodies react? First, Sam and Zelda got a sinking feeling in their stomachs as the blood in their bellies quickly went to their legs so they could run fast. Then, when they jumped to their feet, their hearts beat faster to pump more blood. As they ran from the tiger, they breathed faster to get more air. Their sweat cooled them as they ran. Their pupils became bigger so they could see in the dark, in case they needed to jump over a log while running away. They didn't think about anything but running because they weren't supposed to stop and figure out a friendly way to talk to the tiger.

Sam and Zelda would never have survived without the stress reaction, but stress helps us do more than run from tigers. It keeps us alert and prepared. (You can be sure that the next time Sam and Zelda sat down to munch on berries, they listened for the sounds of a tiger.)

Few of us need to outrun tigers today, but we all have worries that turn on some of those same stress responses. That panicky feeling you sometimes get when you're studying for a big test comes from your body's reaction to stress. Your heart beats almost as fast as it would if you were running from a tiger. Your breathing becomes heavier and you sweat, just as if you were getting ready to run.

### **If Stress Is a Survival Tool, Why Does It Make Us Feel Awful?**

Good old Sam and Zelda had few choices when the tiger chased them. Either the tiger ate them or they escaped. As sick as it sounds, if they'd been eaten, they wouldn't have had much to worry about anymore, right? If they lived, you can be sure their burst of energy allowed them to outrun the tiger or at least outrun Zok (their slower friend who was eaten by the tiger instead). In their run for survival, Sam and Zelda used up every drop of their hormones and then took a well-deserved nap.

In the modern world, our biggest worries are not usually about life or death. We don't really have to run away from our problems. But those same stress hormones stay in our bodies because unlike Sam and Zelda, we don't use them up by running. Instead, those hormones continue to hang around, unused and confused. They seem to be asking, "Why did my body stand still when that 'tiger' attacked?"

Even when there are no real emergencies, our emotions can make our bodies act like there is a huge emergency. This is because the brain controls both emotions and stress hormones. If your brain thinks something terrible is happening, your body will react as if it really is! Even a little bit of stress that never seems to go away can confuse the body. It makes the body work harder to prepare for an emergency that may not really be there.

A tiger running at you is a real crisis. If you believe a mild stress (like a math test) is an emergency, you will not be able to study. Your body will be preparing to deal with a real tiger. You won't be able to concentrate on anything but escaping. The trick is to figure out when something really is an emergency and when your emotions are only acting as if it is one.

### **How Do People Deal With Stress?**

Nobody can avoid all stress, but you can learn ways to deal with it. When you're stressed, it is normal to want to feel better. Some ways to deal with problems might make you feel better for a little while, but can make stress much worse later. Think about some of the ways people might deal with stress that can really mess them up.

- Drugs
- Cigarettes
- Alcohol
- Bullying
- Fighting

These harmful choices might feel good for a couple of minutes, but they can be dangerous. They end up messing up your life, and then you end up a lot more stressed. They're especially dangerous if they are the only way you manage stress. This is one of the ways addictions start.