

# Stress Tips for Teens

by Melanie Greenberg, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Author, and Redwood parent

A 2013 national survey by the American Psychological Association found that stress is extremely common among U.S. teenagers. Teenagers report they're experiencing what they think are unhealthy levels of stress, especially during the school year. In fact, their average reported stress exceeds that of adults. Almost one in three teens report feeling sad or depressed because of stress and 31 percent felt overwhelmed.

Because teens' brains are still growing, learning coping skills during the teenage years can help to rewire your brain to be more resilient and stress-proof. New research shows there can be an upside of stress in promoting a lasting sense of mastery. On the other hand, high levels of chronic stress can cause high blood pressure, chronic anxiety and other negative outcomes. Learning effective coping skills can help you feel more confident, happier and healthier.

If you are feeling stressed about schoolwork, friends, the college application process, and so on, the following six tips can help you cope.

**1. Don't Get Too Far Ahead of Yourself** - When you are stressed or anxious, your brain can get ahead of you, thinking about all the negative possibilities for life if things don't turn out the way you want. You may think about failing out of school, not getting into college, not getting a job, and so on. It's really important to take a step back and ask yourself what specific thing you're anxious about *today*. Then focus just on that specific stressor and what are the next steps you need to take to cope.

**2. Breathe** - When you get stressed, your body goes into a "fight or flight response" as your heart rate speeds up, the stress hormone cortisol surges through your body, glucose and adrenalin surge through your brain and your body readies itself for doing battle or running away. The types of stressors our ancestors faced tended to be marauding lions and tigers, so these were appropriate responses. Taking slow, steady, rhythmic breaths (about 6 breaths per minute) helps your parasympathetic nervous system put the brakes on "fight or flight" and calm down as your brain and body start to perceive safety.

**3. Stick to Your Healthy Routines** - Stress can interfere with our attempts to be healthy. Your body may start craving carbs, sugars, and fats as extra fuel or you may not take the time to eat regular meals and feel you're too busy to go to the gym. You may stay up too late studying and not get enough sleep or you may turn to drugs or alcohol to cope. Research shows that exercise is particularly important when you are under stress. Regular exercise helps your brain to stay focused and avoid distraction, it gives you a boost of energy, helps you to sleep better, and protects your cardiovascular system from the long-term effects of chronic stress. Eating meals with fruits and vegetables also gives you the nutrients you need to function at a high level and stops you from getting mid-afternoon dips in blood pressure or inflammatory effects of too much sugar. Alcohol and marijuana can make you feel more depressed and anxious for 2-3 days after you indulge. So turning to them for stress relief can make you feel worse long-term.

**4. Interrupt Cycles of Worry and Rumination** - Anxiety and stress can narrow your focus of attention onto the source of threat so it's all you can think about. Your mind keeps worrying and ruminating about what grade you may get, what college you'll get into or the mean comment somebody made. It's important to interrupt these unproductive worry cycles that drain your energy without helping you solve the problem. When you find yourself ruminating, make yourself get up and get active, read a book or watch a movie, do an organizational task or call a friend. It's not so important what you do but it is important that you don't sit and ruminate and work yourself into a depression or panic.

**5. Remember that Stress Can Have an Upside:** Not all stress is bad for you. Stress that you have the ability to master can make you feel motivated and energized. Some stresses help you to grow as a person, learn new skills or find new resources, or develop new appreciation for the people that support you. Others can build your confidence as you start to see yourself as a person who can cope with performance demands, failure or rejection. In one study, students giving a speech who were told to think of their body's anxiety responses as signs of excitement performed better than those who were told to calm down.

**6. Become More Mindful:** The definition of mindfulness is deliberately focusing with openness and acceptance on your inner experience. You stop rushing around on automatic pilot and take the time to see the colors, hear the music, feel engaged in your work, savor the happiness you feel in the presence of a trusted friend, or notice your stress building. If you can catch your stress early and stop to breathe, it's less likely to turn into a migraine headache or sore shoulders. If you can learn to just sit with negative feelings like sadness and anxiety, rather than shoving them down, they will pass through quicker. If you

hear your body's signals that it needs a break, you are less likely to get exhausted at the end of the day.

**7. Don't Automatically Believe Your Negative Thoughts:** Your thoughts are just guesses, judgments, or predictions about what might happen. They aren't necessarily true or even helpful. Stress and anxiety can create patterns of negative thinking that are overblown or too black and white. So don't assume that nobody likes you or that you will do poorly, just because you think it. Put on an observer hat and look for objective evidence to determine if your thought is correct. Are there any situations in which the opposite happened to what you predicted? Are you well-prepared? Did you do well the last time? Even if a thought is true, it's not always helpful to listen to. So learn to watch your thoughts and decide which ones to pay attention to and which to ignore.

Dr. Melanie Greenberg is a clinical psychologist with an active practice in Mill Valley, California where she sees teens and adults. She is also an executive coach, speaker, author, and parent of a Redwood student. Her new book called *The Stress-Proof Brain* will be out in January, 2017 from New Harbinger Publishers. Dr. Greenberg also writes *The Mindful Self-Express* blog for *Psychology Today* with over 6 million page views. Prior to entering clinical practice, Dr. Greenberg was a professor and researcher with a specialty in stress management and health psychology. Dr. Greenberg's work has been featured on the BBC, HuffPost Live, [CNN.com](http://CNN.com), Yahoo, Parents Magazine, Women's Health, Men's Health, Forbes, and the Harvard Business Review.