

Help teenagers conquer stress and anxiety



Stress has become a way of life for most American teenagers. They're bombarded from every angle with pressures and expectations, leaving too little time for unwinding and resting. When *Group Magazine* asked 20,000 Christian teenagers about their top needs, the third most common response was "I need help managing or dealing with the stresses in my life." Pennsylvania youth minister Jana Snyder said of today's kids, "I sense an overwhelming burden to be successful and to be busy doing 100 different things every day."

In a recent Associated Press/MTV survey, 13- to 17-year-olds said school is their main worry. Stress, not relationships, is the hottest topic of conversation at school, says one teenager. Another adds, "I'm just really overwhelmed. I even compete with my parents about who's stressing more."

Child psychiatrist Thomas McCormack suggests several ways that parents can help ease teenagers' academic stress. First, discuss your expectations. Assure kids that you're proud of them when they try their best, no matter the outcome. Second, stay involved. Show interest in your teenagers' classes, extracurricular

activities, and schedules. Be available to help or talk when needed. Finally, watch for sudden declines in academic performance. These could indicate a learning disorder or emotional distress (such as depression and anxiety) that requires professional evaluation.

Some stress is inevitable, but stressing out is optional. Here are some expert tips that teenagers—and parents—can use to manage a stressful situation:

- Pray, turning your worries over to God.
- Confide your stressed-out feelings to a trusted adult.
- Exercise to release tension and to benefit from your body's endorphins.
- Get enough sleep to reduce irritability.
- Eat regularly. Avoid junk food and sugar, as well as "emotional eating."
- Avoid caffeine—it can increase anxiety
- Avoid smoking, drinking alcohol, and taking drugs.
- Take a bath or shower.
- Pause and do some deep breathing.
- Keep a journal to help process your experiences and feelings.
- Find a new hobby to enjoy together.
- Remember the worst-case scenario. For test anxiety, kids could ask, "What's the worst thing that can happen if I bomb the test?"
- Break large tasks into little pieces.
- Refuse to demand perfection from yourself or others.
- Learn to say "no" to excessive activities and unrealistic expectations.



Here's a snapshot of teenagers' experiences with stress:

- Teenage girls are 55% more likely than teenage boys to say they pressure themselves to get good grades in school. And less than half of the pressured group of girls believes their parents realize how stressed out they are. (ronicohensandler.com)
- Although one major study found that kids from middle-income households experience more stress than their peers, another found that affluent kids are the most stressed, for fear of "falling back." (AP/MTV; *New York Times*/CBS)
- An estimated 10% of teenagers suffer from an anxiety disorder. (teenhelp.com)
- Highly stressed teenagers are twice as likely as other teenagers to smoke, drink, get drunk, and use illegal drugs. (alcoholism.about.com)



Great Questions to Ask Your Kids

Tackle the topic of stress by asking your kids these discussion starters:

1. How stressed have you been lately? What things cause you the most anxiety, and why? Describe what your body and mind feel like when you're stressed out.
2. What are some ways you cope with stress? Which of these are productive, and which are destructive?
3. What amount of stress, if any, is necessary or helpful in life? Would you want to be stress-free? Why or why not?
4. Is it sinful to be stressed out? Why or why not? How we can give our anxieties over to God?



Focus on Prayer

PRAY THAT:

1. God will help your teenagers cast all their anxieties and burdens on him because he cares for them (1 Peter 5:7).
2. Your teenagers will put their lives and worries into God's hands, knowing that he has a perfect plan and purpose for them.
3. Your teenagers will find healthy ways to deal with academic, social, and emotional stress.
4. Your family and home can be a haven for teenagers when they feel overwhelmed by school and life.

Verse of the Month

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29)

Jesus offers respite from the many anxieties and cares of daily life. Because he was fully human, he knows what it's like to face challenges and expectations. By praying to Jesus and trusting him to help us, we can find peace for our worried hearts and minds.

Going Deeper

When Indiana youth worker Scott Greene realized he was getting out of touch with teenagers' lives, he decided to return to high school. Read his whole account at SimplyYouthMinistry.com.

Walking the halls of Warsaw High School as a 33-year-old sophomore for two weeks was pretty overwhelming at points. I faced fears and insecurities that I haven't felt since I was in high school myself (back when Michael Jackson and mullets were cool). However, I gained a newfound respect for kids and the pressures they face. Here are a few observations I made:

- Kids don't own their time. It doesn't belong to them. If I want to eat lunch at 11:30 instead of at noon, I eat early. I forgot what it was like to not make personal decisions about my time.
- Every day, kids spend a large portion of their hours trying to excel in areas that they aren't exceptionally good at and possibly don't enjoy. I know this is a necessary part of education, but I never thought about how frustrating that must be.
- Kids are getting pressure from everyone. One student told me he has 13 bosses: five teachers, one principal, two coaches, two employers, two parents, and a youth pastor. He said every one of these people has expectations for him, and none of those expectations is low. Kids may not have a mortgage or hungry mouths to feed, but their pressures are very real to them. We must keep that in mind, especially if they let us down or don't live up to the standards we set.
- Kids all want to excel, even if it means excelling at being bad. Adults run so fast and hard ourselves that we have to ration the attention we give teenagers. They're longing for our love, attention, and focused time. They're longing to be known—and known well. We must carve out serious time and emotional energy for kids and create environments and schedules that encourage biblical community.

