

# STRESSED OUT TEENS

According to **by Jennifer Dyl, PhD, Bradley Hospital psychologist**

"Stress" is defined as the way our bodies and minds react to life changes. Since adolescence is a period of significant change, including physical, emotional, social, and academic changes, many teens are under more stress than at any other time of life.

## Teenage Stress Factors

- academic pressure and career decisions
- pressure to wear certain types of clothing or hairstyles
- pressure to try drugs, alcohol or sex
- pressure to fit in with peer groups and measure up to others
- adaptation to bodily changes
- family and peer conflicts
- taking on too many activities at one time

It is very important for teens to learn to handle stress, as long-term build-up of stress that is not handled effectively may lead to problems, including physical illness, anxiety or depression, which call for professional help.

## Teenage "Stress Overload" Signs:

- increased physical illness (headaches, stomachaches, muscle pains, chronic fatigue)
- "shutting down" and withdrawal from people and activities
- increased anger or irritable lashing out at others
- increased tearfulness and feelings of hopelessness
- chronic feelings of worry and nervousness
- difficulty sleeping and eating
- difficulty concentrating

Our body's natural reaction to life events that we perceive as overwhelming is the "fight or flight" response, which may produce a faster heart rate, increased blood flow, shallow breathing, a sense of dread and a desire to escape. However, teens can teach themselves to perceive life challenges as being within their control and can even change their body's reactions to such events, promoting a lower heart rate, deeper breathing, clearer thinking and feelings of calmness and control. There are many stress management skills that promote the relaxation response.

## Stress Management Skills for Teens

- Taking deep breaths accompanied by thoughts of being in control ("I can handle this")
- Progressive muscle relaxation, (repeatedly tensing and relaxing large muscles of the body)
- Setting small goals and breaking tasks into smaller manageable chunks
- Exercising and eating regular meals, and avoiding excessive caffeine
- Focusing on things you can control and letting go of things you cannot control
- Rehearsing and practicing feared situations (e.g., practicing public speaking or asking someone out on a date)
- Talking about problems with others, including parents, older adults and friends
- Lowering unrealistic expectations
- Scheduling breaks and enjoyable activities, such as music, art, sports, socializing
- Accepting yourself as you are and identifying unique strengths and building on them, but realizing no one is perfect!

**Source:** This article was originally published in *Rhode Island Family Guide*<http://www.lifespan.org/services/childhealth/parenting/teen-stress.htm>