

Educational Resource Handbook



For Students

What you need to know
about high school, college,
and your potential

**Duke
TIP**

Duke University Talent Identification Program
7th Grade Talent Search

2008 Edition

TOO STRESSED TO THINK?

Using the Body-Mind Connection to Get Back in Balance

Annie Fox

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“I’ve got tons of homework and school just started. None of my friends are in any of my classes. Soccer try outs are this afternoon, and I forgot my shoes. And my mom wants me to baby-sit my brother tonight. How’s it going?! I’m *STRESSED!*”

Stress is one of those words you probably hear all the time from adults and other teens. Maybe you use it a lot yourself. But what does it actually mean?

Stress is what happens in your body when it’s faced with demands and pressures of many kinds. It’s that push you feel inside that throws you off-balance (physically, emotionally, and mentally). Stress can make it hard for you to think clearly and to make good choices.

You always know for sure when you’re thirsty, starving, or too cold. You don’t need anyone to tell you when you’re feeling happy, sad, or embarrassed. But it’s not always easy to know when you’re feeling stress. It can creep up on you without warning. You may only figure out that you are stressed *after* you’ve totally lost it and yelled at someone (or worse). Since stress can sneak up on you, build up inside, and make you do things you might regret, it would be good to know you’re stressing *before* you go over the edge.

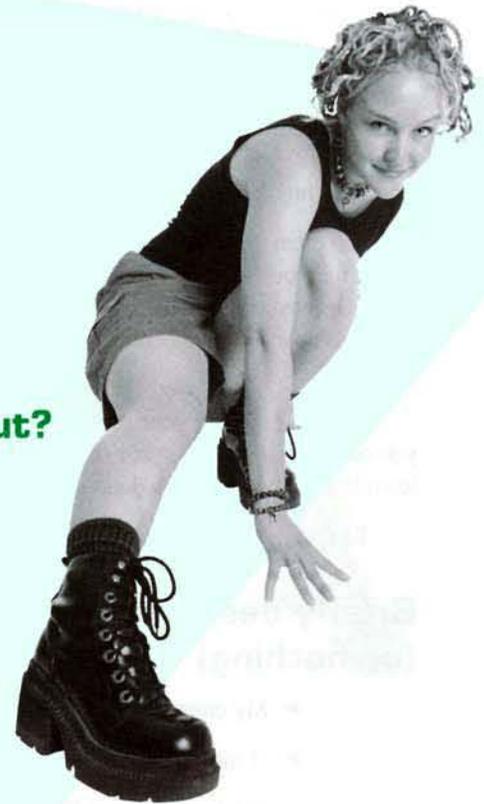
There are definite changes that take place in your body and with your emotions when you’re stressed. Even though they’re not exactly the same for everyone, the most common symptoms can help you clue in on your particular reactions. Here’s what some teens said they feel when experiencing stress:

How does your body feel when you’re stressed?

- I get either a headache or an upset stomach. Gretchen, 14
- I feel like I just have to lie down and think about something else. Andi, 12
- I feel exhausted. Michael, 12
- I feel nervous and antsy. Paul, 13
- I feel fat, and I sleep a lot. Jared, 13
- I feel like adrenaline is pumping through my veins really fast. Carlos, 14
- I don’t feel like eating, even though that would normally be a time when I’m hungry. Eli, 14

How do you feel emotionally when you’re stressed out?

- Really down, like nothing I do is right. George, 14
- I always feel like crying. Isabel, 15
- I get very frustrated. Roberto, 14
- I take my anger out on other people. Tyler, 14
- Moody. I snap at everything. Corina, 15
- Grumpy. I feel discouraged and annoyed. Ben, 14
- I don’t want to talk to anyone. Nonni, 13
- I feel as if there is no tomorrow. Alex, 16
- Really I don’t know how I feel. There are no words that I can use to say how I feel or explain it.... I just really hate it when I get stressed. Maria, 17



None of that sounds like fun. So what kinds of things trigger stress? When we asked over 1,200 middle and high school students “What stresses you out?” the answer most frequently given was *school!* (Not surprising, huh?) The second most frequent answer was: friends and social life. In the number three slot was: parents and family. So, if you’re wondering, here are the most common stressors for teens like you: deadlines • multitasking • social pressures • homework • the future • term papers • teachers • fights with friends • rumors • conflict • confrontation • abrupt changes • failure • too much work • an overloaded schedule • late buses • time-management issues • college decisions • sports • overly demanding coaches • grades • weight • guys • girls • mom • dad • step-mom • step-dad • ex-boyfriend • ex-girlfriend • sex • sister • brother • expectations • rules

Your Brain and Stress – What does your brain have to do with stress? Only *everything*.

In addition to its other many and varied duties, your brain is also the home of your *stress response*. Your brain controls all of the emotions and physical reactions you experience when you’re stressed. You can’t rewire your brain to become immune to stress, but by understanding how different parts of your brain work (and don’t work) you can change how you respond when something stressful throws you off-balance.

Picture your brain as having three main parts. (It’s actually a lot more complex than that, but this image will help you .)

Your reptilian or “survival” brain is your *survival* command center. When you’re stressed, this part of your brain takes charge of your automatic stress response. It’s designed to help keep you alive during life and death emergencies.

Your mammalian or “feeling” brain is home to all your *emotions*. It gives you the ability to care about other people and develop relationships. This is also the part of the brain that reacts during moments of intense emotion (anger, fear, grief, embarrassment).

Your neo-cortex or “thinking” brain serves as a *problem solver*. It lets you explore the world intellectually, weigh the pros and cons of a situation, and make clear, conscious choices (like deciding to wear a bike helmet or control your temper).

Our thinking brains set us apart from every other creature on earth. No other mammal, and certainly no reptile, has anything quite like a human’s thinking brain. Humans can think in great detail about our feelings, talk about our fears and dreams, write poetry, compose music, and make plans for taking care of ourselves and others. We analyze, evaluate, and reflect on events, decisions, and behavior—past, present, and future. It’s too bad that our thinking brains aren’t available to us 24/7.

Why aren’t they? Because when you’re under stress, the actions and reactions that take place in your brain impact how you make decisions and control your impulses. Suppose someone yells at you, and you start to feel stress. Typically what happens is: 1) Your feeling brain overloads, 2) your survival brain releases stress hormones, and 3) your thinking brain takes a break. In other words, *you stop thinking and start reacting*. *How can you make good decisions when you’re not thinking? You can’t!*

Too often, people under stress, think, say, and do the worst possible things. For instance, instead of telling your dad that you’ll be right there after you finish your math homework, you might repeatedly ignore him when he calls you for dinner, resulting in a needless argument. Or maybe you yell at your little sister when in fact you’re stressed about something that happened earlier in the day with your friends. She ends up crying; you end up feeling bad and getting in trouble. You look back later and find yourself saying, “I don’t know what I was thinking!”

You can’t shut off your stress response. It’s millions of years in the making, and your survival brain isn’t going to give up that easily. But you *can* learn to manage your stress more effectively by learning to recognize your individual stress response and what triggers it. You can learn to calm down so you don’t spend so much time doing and saying things you’ll later regret.

To find out what teens did when they were too stressed to think, we asked students these two survey questions:

Briefly describe a time when you were stressed and you did something (or nothing) that you later regretted?

- My entire junior year I overate because I was so stressed. I gained like 40 pounds! Lynn, 17
- “I hit a friend for a stupid reason. I lost the friendship.” Raoul, 14
- “I hung up on my friend when she’d didn’t want to go to my party. I thought she didn’t want to go because of some people she didn’t like. It turns out her dad fell and almost broke his back.” Rachel, 12

- “An old man was being teased on the bus by some boy, and I didn’t help him. I still feel really bad.” Wen, 16
- “One day at practice, I heard some derogatory remarks about gays that I resented (since I know people who are gay.) But I didn’t say anything and after, there never seemed to be the right time to bring it up again.” Kyle, 15

Sometimes, even when you’re stressed, it’s possible to do the right thing, like these teens did.

Briefly describe a time when you were under stress but made a positive choice?

- “I stood up for friends of mine who were being bullied.” Charlotte, 13
- “I stole a football jersey, but then I got so stressed over it that I just brought it back.” Chen, 13
- “When my friend offered me drugs, I said no and walked away.” John, 16

The one thing you can count on in life is that things are constantly changing. Sometimes you get advance warning of the changes so you can prepare yourself. Other times, you may seem to get flattened without knowing exactly what hit you. You’ll always be challenged to keep balancing the demands of your school work, family, friends, and time. Hopefully when you’re feeling stressed, you’ll recognize it, stop, calm down, and think about your next best move.

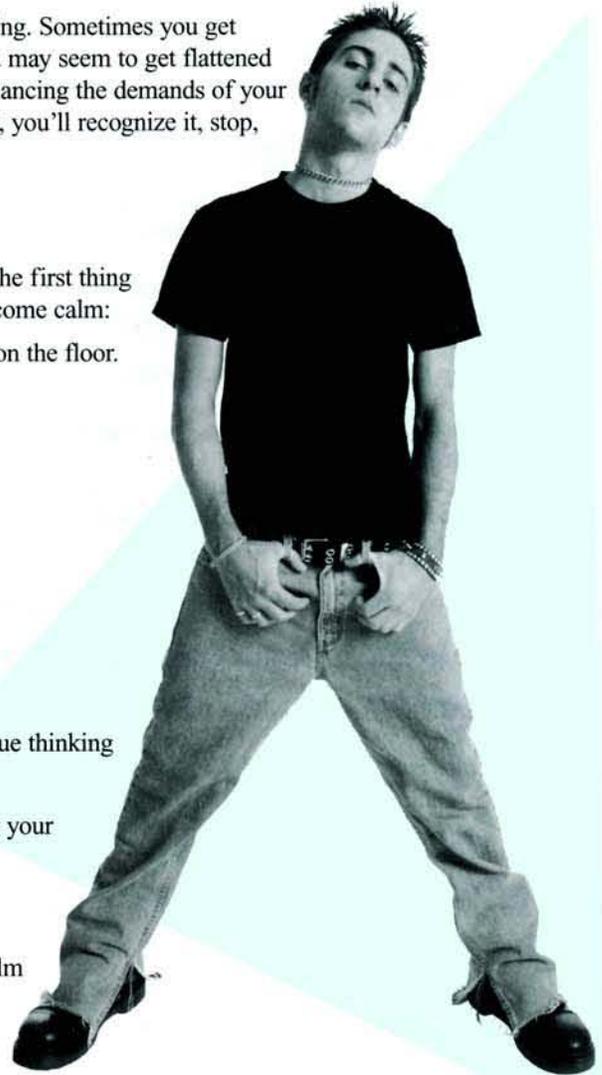
Breathe and Re-Center

Breathing is a powerful stress-busting tool. It’s so important it should be the first thing you do whenever you need to get a grip. Here’s how to breathe properly to become calm:

1. Sit with your back supported against a chair and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Rest your hands lightly on the top of your thighs.
3. Close your eyes and get as relaxed as you can.
4. Inhale slowly and evenly through your nose.
5. Exhale slowly and evenly through your mouth.
6. Try it again and this time when you inhale through your nose, think the number “1”
7. Now exhale through your mouth and think the number “2”
8. Continue s-l-o-w-l-y and evenly, inhaling and exhaling. Continue thinking of the numbers, 3, 4, 5, etc.
9. If your mind wanders and you lose count, that’s fine, just bring your focus back to your breathing and start at “1” again.
10. Breathe in and out at least ten times.

This is a re-centering breath. Use it whenever you feel stressed. It will calm your mind and help clear your thinking brain.

With awareness of the things that cause you stress, how your body and mind reacts, and this simple breathing exercise you can regain control of your thoughts and emotions, enabling you to deal with stressful situations and make good decisions.



Excerpted in part, from Too Stressed to Think? A Teen Guide to Staying Sane when Life Makes you Crazy, by Annie Fox, M.Ed. and Ruth Kirschner, Free Spirit, 2006.

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