

FOURTEEN STEPS TO GET YOU OUT? Here's How to Help...



**Is Your Teen
Stressed Out?
Here's How to Help**

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Introduction

Parenting an adolescent can be one of the most challenging experiences you'll ever have. Just when you think your child is growing up and becoming more responsible and helpful around the house, the teen years set in. No wonder G. Stanley Hall, a noted American Psychologist, referred to adolescence as a time of "storm and stress."

The American Psychological Association recently completed a study and discovered that teens feel stressed at about the same level as adults do. Furthermore, the school year tends to trigger the highest levels of teen stress, surpassing the greatest levels of adult stress. The study also found that teens lack awareness of how their stress affects their lives.

The good news is that your role as a parent places you in a strong position to step in and offer guidance and encouragement when your teen is overwhelmed with the pressures of growing up.

To fulfill these tasks effectively, you'll find it necessary to have a clear understanding of the teen years developmentally and know how they affect a maturing child.

In addition, knowing how to identify when your teen is stressed will also help. Armed with the necessary "tools," you'll be better able to educate and assist your adolescent through their trying times, so they can mature into successful adults.

It's important to know what's happening to your teen intellectually, physically, and behaviorally from the ages of 13 to 18. What can cause teen stress? What are the symptoms and how can you help? You'll find answers to these critical questions in this guide.

*"I think being a teenager is such a compelling
time period in your life -
it gives you some of your worst scars
and some of your most exhilarating moments..."*

~Stephenie Meyer

Adolescent Development: What's Happening Intellectually?

It's obvious that many things are happening inside your teen's mind. Therefore, it's helpful to learn more about some of these changes taking place in their developing brain.

Intellectual changes you'll notice in your teen include:

1. **Abstract thinking.** Your teen is developing the brain power to grasp abstract ideas, such as complex math concepts.
2. **Understanding of morality.** As teens grow, they begin to have their own ideas about morality. ***During the teenage years, kids are figuring out what's okay and not okay to do or say.*** In fact, this particular aspect of development is often the

source of your teen's adamant disagreement with you if you try to steer them away from certain "types" of friends.

3. **Formation of their own opinions.** Up until this point, your son or daughter may have wanted to disobey you, but they didn't. However, now is when they begin having their own ideas and they'll likely feel very strongly about them.
 - For example, they might say things like, "You can't take away my car keys because it's my car," or "There's nothing inappropriate about wearing ear expanders," or "My music is so much better than what you listen to."
4. **Questioning everything. *Adolescence is often characterized by the teen's insistence on questioning much of what you do as a parent or want them to do as your son or daughter.***
 - For example, they might ask things like, "Why can't I stay out until midnight on Friday night?" or "Why can't I get a tattoo on my neck?"

5. **Deeper capacity for relationships.** As teens mature, they begin to understand more about relationships, especially those that involve intimate thoughts and feelings. ***Teens tend to be quite interested in procuring and maintaining romantic relationships.***
 - Their confidence is building as they see that a successful boyfriend or girlfriend relationship largely depends on their choices and ability to share things about themselves.
 - Your teen may feel madly attached to their chosen partner and want to spend every waking moment with them.
 - When you understand that desiring emotional relationships is a sign that teens are maturing as their development naturally “demands,” you may find dating issues a little easier to accept and deal with.
6. **More mature behavior.** Even though your teen may drive you over the edge at times, they are still showing signs of maturity. For example, they want to drive a car, they may step up to care for a

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younger sibling, and they usually start to complete household tasks or school work independently.

Close your eyes and try to recall what you went through while growing up. ***Reflecting back on your own adolescent years may remind you to approach your teen's experience with a bit more understanding, patience, and sense of humor.***

"It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are."

~E.E. Cummings

Adolescent Physical Development

On top of all the intellectual changes, your teen is undergoing some incredibly impactful physical development, as well. Keep in mind that these changes provide more triggering mechanisms for teen stress.

The major physical changes that occur in adolescence are:

1. **Additional hormones.** Massive amounts of hormones are triggering noticeable changes.
2. **Development of secondary sex characteristics.** Girls' breasts will fill out. They'll also grow body hair on the legs, armpits, and pubic area. For boys, the scrotum, penis, and testicles will reach their adult size by age 17 or so. Also, hair in the pubic area, legs, face, chest, and armpits will appear.

3. **Menstrual periods for girls.** The beginning of monthly periods for girls can happen as early as 9 years or as late as 16.

4. **Voice changes and nocturnal emissions for boys.** You'll begin to notice your teen son's voice deepening, just before the teen years set in or early on in the first year or so of his teens.
 - You may be unsure about your son's experience with wet dreams (an ejaculation of semen during the night while sleeping). However, the process is entirely normal and expected as part of the teen years.

5. **Increasing height. *Although there's some slight variability in the timeframe for growing, both sexes have usually reached the peak of their growth spurt by age 18.***

Adolescent Behavior

As you know, the intellectual and physical changes of adolescence bring on many behavioral changes as well. Typically, there will be a difference in how your child acts and relates to others.

Some of the most common behavioral changes occurring in adolescence are:

1. **Spending time separately from parents.** *If you have a teen, you've likely noticed they'll choose to be with their friends whenever possible.* They might voice embarrassment to even be seen in the car with you.
2. **Challenging parents' authority.** Although it might catch you off-guard initially, rest assured that your teen's occasional challenge of your authority is a natural phenomenon of adolescence.

- 3. Testing the limits. *Your adolescent will likely try to stretch the boundaries you've established for them.*** For example, you might tell them to be home by 10:30 p.m. from their Saturday night date, but they arrive home at 11:00 p.m. instead. What will you do about it? They want to see.

You're probably beginning to piece together some possible sources of stress your teen may be experiencing. Simply by reviewing this information about the adolescent years and their developing minds and bodies, you're gaining valuable insight. Plus, you have your own history to draw from regarding your own development and teenage years.

Next, let's move on to the nitty-gritty of stress and your adolescent.

"I spent the first fourteen years of my life convinced that my looks were hideous. Adolescence is painful for everyone, I know, but mine was plain weird."

~Uma Thurman

Why is Your Teen Upset? Common Sources of Teen Stress

If you have a maturing adolescent in your home, you've probably been a bit surprised by the unexpected emotional outbursts or changes in your teenager's behaviors. Why are they acting this way?

It's because teens have many reasons to harbor feelings of stress and anxiety.

Consider these common sources of stress that your teen may be experiencing:

1. **Peer pressure.** Being a teen isn't easy, especially when it comes to peers. Friends might be dabbling in alcohol or marijuana use and strongly encouraging your son or daughter to try it.

- ***Your teen may be swimming against a strong current of peer pressure or even following through with experimenting with certain things, simply to relieve the pressure they get from their friends. And doing so could be stressful for them.***

2. **Competition regarding material items.**

Something we all probably remember from our teen years is how badly we wanted exactly what the other kids had. Although back then it may have been the trendiest sneakers or clothing logo on your threads, these days the stakes are much higher.

- Hand-held computers, smartphones, and cars are coveted by teens. To be accepted, your teen likely feels socially pressured to have and show off the required goods.

3. **Winning the popularity contest.** “Our house isn’t as nice as Brittany’s,” or “I wish my dad had a really cool car like Adam’s dad,” might be the kind of things that trigger feelings of stress in your son or daughter.

- Teens want to be known in their school and widely accepted by others. They want to be in the popular group, hanging out with the peers they believe to be “cool” and admired. ***If your adolescent doesn't feel they fit in with the social group they desire, stress results.***
4. **School work.** Although learning new information is a positive experience, the challenge can also place a heavy burden on your teen. They may be wondering, “Will I ever understand this math?” or “How will I write a five-page paper on ‘How Centrifugal Force Affects Daily Life?’”
 - Some days, your teen will come home from school with a stack of books and numerous assignments they're expected to complete. If your child truly cares about school, they'll feel monumental pressure to earn decent grades.
 5. **Too many extracurricular activities. *Teens these days have schedules that would tire out anyone.*** Think about a typical schedule for a high-schooler: football practice daily, French Club once a week, and the Debate Team every day later in

the year. That doesn't even consider weekend events for some of these groups.

6. **Relationships.** Whether it's a romance or close friendships they're struggling with, teens often worry about their relationships. "Does Chris still like me?" "Sam is spending too much time with Sally." "Why doesn't Sue want to hang out with me anymore?"

With all of this anxiety, your adolescent may feel stress more often than you realize.

"As a teenager I was so insecure. I was the type of guy that never fitted in because he never dared to choose. I was convinced I had absolutely no talent at all. For nothing. And that thought took away all my ambition too."

~Johnny Depp

Stress Symptoms of Adolescents

Symptoms of stress in teens vary widely. Some are a natural function of feeling pressure. Other reactions may be a bit more serious and require professional assistance.

Watch for these signs of stress in your teen:

1. **Unexpected emotional outbursts.** Think of the common behavior of your teen running down the hallway into their bedroom and slamming the door. Perhaps angrily throwing a rubber ball at their sibling or shouting, "I hate you!" and leaving the room are behaviors you've started to see in your teen.
 - ***Your teen's emotional outbursts may tend to be a bit "over the top" in relation to situation that occurred at the time, which is quite common during adolescence.***

2. **Dropping grades.** Big changes in your teen's school grades can signal that they're struggling in some way.
3. **Changes in eating habits.** For many teens, this symptom can be quite telling, in terms of how they're feeling about life. Stay in tune with your kids' eating habits. A noticeable weight gain or loss may require a trip to the doctor to evaluate what might be happening.
4. **Haywire emotions.** Perhaps your teen is crying more often, raising their voice to you, or even whining about everything.
 - ***Although up-and-down emotions are normal adolescent behaviors, a marked increase in your teens' unstable mood swings can certainly be an indication that your teen is under stress.***
5. **Complete withdrawal from the family.** Teens avoid their parents and siblings sometimes. But, when you haven't seen your adolescent at the dinner table in several days, something may be amiss in terms of your teen's stress level.

6. **Change in physical appearance.** As most adults do, teens may also suffer from stress or depression to the point where they refuse to take care of their physical grooming or hygiene.
 - If you notice a difference in your son or daughter's concern about their appearance, they may be upset about something. For example, maybe your daughter isn't styling her hair or choosing her outfits anymore or your son dresses in the same shirt three days in a row.

7. **Lack of social or "hanging out" time.** *If your teen has an overwhelming schedule of school and extracurricular activities, they may need some assistance from you in limiting their demanding schedule.* There will be more mentioned about how to do this later on.

8. **Unhealthy sleep habits.** If your teen is having difficulty sleeping or wants to lie in bed until noon, it may be because they're having difficulty dealing with the stress in their lives.

9. **Negative attitude.** In the event your teen turns from their normally extroverted, bubbly self into a quiet, sad-looking kid, be aware they may be struggling with the Stress Monster.

These symptoms are commonly seen in stressed-out teens. However, your teen may display other indicators, as well. ***As a parent, your task is to be on the lookout for the signs of stress in your teen and to squelch it before it takes over their lives.***

"I was a quiet teenager, introverted, full of angst."

~Nigella Lawson

Strategies to Help Relieve Your Teen's Stress

As a parent, after you spot the symptoms that your son or daughter is feeling stressed, you might feel at a loss about how you can help. The good news is that you have a myriad of options on how to assist in the de-stressing process.

Use these strategies to help relieve your adolescent's stress:

1. **Schedule weekly time to spend alone with your teen and ask, "What's bothering you?"** Even though you may do something together every week as a family, like go to the movies or grab some ice cream, you can further help your teen by establishing a time to do nothing but talk, with the focus on them.

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- Keep a regular schedule for your quality time. For example, every Thursday evening from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., it's time to hang out, play games, take a walk, or go out shopping together.
 - **Weekly time is very important because it helps parents stay in touch with what's going on with their teens.** You hear about their interests, successes, and challenges each week.
 - For your teen, they know that regardless of what happens in their lives, they're getting a chunk of quality time with Mom or Dad each week. During this time, they can pour their hearts out about what's troubling them, if they need to.
2. **Stay in tune with your teen's school and activities schedule.** As a parent, it's your responsibility to ensure that your adolescent's schedule isn't too cramped or exhausting. ***It may be necessary for you to help them eliminate some of their activities if you find they're overwhelmed.***

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- The best way to do this is to thoroughly discuss and approve any activity they want to participate in. This helps you keep a handle on the activities from the beginning. It also teaches them to manage their time and fully focus on a smaller number of activities.
 - For example, maybe freshman year, they want to play basketball and go to Spanish Club, so it might be unwise to start taking guitar lessons during that same semester.
 - ***Kids need time to let their hair down and de-stress by simply hanging out with friends, going to the movies, reading, or watching some television.***
3. **Listen more.** Listening can be a challenge for you because hearing about the intricate details of the latest rock group's lyrics may be far from your cup of tea. However, when you listen to such things, your teen sees that you're interested in their likes and dislikes.

4. **Talk less. Avoid being preachy or bossy toward your teen.** For most teens, their days of being bossed around by a parent are over.

5. **Show respect and concern.** Say something like, “Hey, I see that you’re really upset about something. What’s up?” or “It looks like your Chemistry class is getting pretty tough. Is there anything I can do to help?”
 - Using open-ended conversation starters (questions) with your teen gives them the opportunity to elaborate on what’s going on with them.

 - ***When teenagers are encouraged to talk about their stress, they’re defusing it.***

6. **Provide uplifting praise and feedback.** We all want to hear that we’re doing something well. As a parent, you’re in a perfect position to let your teen know they’re doing a great job at something. Notice all the little things they do well and verbally reinforce them.

- “Thanks for loading the dishwasher.” “You look great in that blue shirt.” “I appreciate your reading a bedtime story to your little sister last night.” ***On a tough day for your teen, positive comments and praise can help them get through the stress.***

7. **Engage in regular physical exercise together.**

One of the best strategies for stress management is taking part in some strenuous, doctor-approved exercise.

- Riding bikes together, going for a jog, and taking the kayaks out on the river are just a few fun, physical ways you can help your teen to manage stress. Taking a yoga or Zumba class together can be enjoyable and fresh, making that stress melt away.
- When you work out together, there will be fewer days filled with stress.

8. **Model assertive communication in the home.**

When adults in the home model effective communication skills, so will the kids. Hopefully, you're already doing these things when there are

disagreements. But if you haven't tried this yet, check out this strategy:

- Stick to the facts. When discussing a troubling situation, focus on the observations of what occurred. Keep your emotions out of it.
- Use simple and non-inflammatory language to calmly say how you feel. For example, "I felt _____ when _____ happened."
- Ask the other person involved how they feel and listen respectfully.
- Look at options you both have, examining possible end results. Then, negotiate and agree on how to proceed.

9. **Teach problem-solving.** All of us benefit from using our problem-solving skills. ***Help your child learn how to solve their own issues by prompting them to talk through it.***

- For example, if your teen says they're worried their friend, Paul, doesn't like them anymore, show them ways they can deal with it.

- Ask questions like, “What do you think happened?” “How do you feel about Paul?” “What do you think would be some ways you could resolve this?” “Do you ‘own’ this issue, or is it being caused by someone else?”

10. **Help them to stop catastrophizing.** Humans tend to build up their stressors and blow them out of proportion by continually talking about them. This is called catastrophizing.

- An example might be your teen saying something like, “Oh, I couldn’t believe how hard that math test was! Who would know how to figure out those complicated questions? I know I got an F on it. I’ll probably flunk the whole course and not make it into college, just because of one dumb exam!”
- ***As a parent, you can steer your teens to consider the facts, rather than getting hung up in their emotions.*** You could do this by:
 1. Encouraging them to stick to the facts. Acknowledge that although the test was hard, perhaps there are better ways they

can prepare themselves for other such tests in the future.

2. Letting them know that they've just shared the worst-case scenario. Now, have them describe the best-case. In this example, that could be them getting a C on the test.
3. Guiding them to develop a Plan B for what they can do in the event they get the F (meet with the teacher, ask to do extra credit, or spend an hour each evening studying the next chapter so they can ace the next test and bring up their grade).

11. **Laugh and have fun together.** Each day, ensure that you and your teen laugh together. It may be telling a silly joke, sharing a funny story, dancing around the house, or watching an age-appropriate situation comedy together on television.

- ***When you model a fun-loving attitude, so will your teen. And laughter can be a healing elixir for stress.***

12. **Consider studying relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation.** These stress management practices are tools your kids can use throughout their whole lives.

- You and your teen can each look up one technique online and then practice them together for a few minutes each day or week, depending on their stress level. Experimenting with different mind and body techniques together can be fun and helpful at the same time.

13. **Instill confidence.** Parents hold a very special place in the lives of their adolescent children, even if it doesn't seem that way. You can instill confidence by assigning a job or two around the house to your kids.

- The younger your kids are when they start having responsibilities in the home, the more confidence they'll garner as they mature.
- Nothing helps any of us manage stress more effectively than having the confidence that we can do something.

14. **Set an effective example.** If you want your kid to masterfully manage their stress, then it's wise to be able to successfully navigate your own bumps in the road. ***Recognize the power you have in your teen's life by being a fantastic role model for your kids.*** When they see you rolling with the punches and being successful, they'll feel they can do it, too.

15. **Avoid bringing negativity into the home.** You'll likely remember that when you were a teen there was a teacher or neighbor who displayed a negative attitude towards teens or their interests.
 - Do everything you can to maintain a positive attitude in everything you do. Smile more and lighten the mood. It makes a difference for you and your kids.

When you determine your adolescent might be overwhelmed with the stressors in their life, you now have an entire toolbox of suggestions to help them navigate the rough waters of teen life. ***As you incorporate these techniques into your everyday lives, you'll notice some positive changes in your teen's mood and behavior.***

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In the event you consistently apply these methods and your adolescent continues to be stressed out, it may be wise to seek a local mental health professional to work directly with you and your teen.

If this is the route you choose to take, rest assured that your son or daughter stands to gain plenty of knowledge about stress management for the future!

"I was a troubled teen and I was constantly looking for someone to throw me a rope. Those ropes are connections. They allow us to see that life exists beyond the little worlds we are currently a part of."

~Lauren Oliver

Conclusion

Your teen will likely experience at least some of the stressors of adolescence and you may find yourself at a loss for what to do. Although this is normal, as a parent, you're in a position to model, guide, encourage, and teach your teen to strategically manage their challenges.

If you understand the adolescent years and the impact of stress on your teen, you're in the best place to coach your child through some of their most difficult times. Your family will live a more harmonious life and your teen will mature into an appreciated, contributing member of society. Start living virtually stress-free with your teen today!

"Adolescents are not monsters. They are just people trying to learn how to make it among the adults in the world, who are probably not so sure themselves."

~Virginia Satir


This is a lot to take in. We don't claim to have all the answers, but we want to help in ways that we can. I know what its like to be a stressed out teen and probably so do you, but I promise that the teens of today deal with much different issues than you and I did. It's hard to know what to do when you feel helpless to assist your child or children navigate these years.

We have a special time just for teens at our church on Wednesday nights starting at 6pm called The Well. It's well supervised and a safe place for middle and high school students. We have a pool table, air hockey, ping pong, video games, arcade basketball, a snack bar with a grill and great music. The teens that come find a place of belonging and if your teen is stressed this can be some stress relief.

I've been in youth ministry in one form or another since 1998. Even though styles and cultures and music tastes change, the issues that teens face are remarkably similar. Let us help you with our experience in these areas.

Please reach out if you have any questions.

God's Blessings Be Upon You,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt McKeown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Matt McKeown
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