



IS THIS YOU?

Stress and anxiety among children and teens is off the charts. Here's what you can do about it.

BY KRISTIN LEWIS, WITH CAROLYN GREGOIRE

It's 1 a.m. and you're supposed to be asleep. But instead you're wide awake, and your mind is swirling with worries. Baseball tryouts are next week and you *have* to make the travel team. State tests are coming up—days of brain-rattling math problems and impossible writing prompts. And what's with your best friend, who didn't like your last two Instagram posts? You squeeze your eyes shut. *Sleep! Sleep!* But oh, no. Now you remember that you have a vocabulary test tomorrow. AAAHHHHH!



Hopefully, this isn't you. But you can probably relate. Today's kids are under pressure to excel in school, keep up in sports, manage friends and family—to perform, connect, and succeed like never before. The stress can be overwhelming. According to a survey by the American Psychological Association, one in three kids experiences stress symptoms like sleeplessness, headaches, and stomach pains.

What is going on?

The Science of Stress

Stress is the feeling of anger, frustration, or anxiety we feel when faced with situations that overwhelm us. We all feel stress from time to time. Stress is the pounding of your heart when you step onto the pitcher's mound, the butterflies swarming in your stomach when you take a big test, the sleepless night before an audition for the school play.

Feeling stress is part of the human experience. In fact, it's key to the very survival of the human race.

For our early ancestors, who lived in caves and were stalked by saber-toothed tigers and spear-wielding enemies, the ability to respond quickly to threats was the difference between life and death. And so the brain is wired to trigger a response at the first sign of danger. The heart races, increasing blood flow to the muscles. The pupils dilate to let in as much light as possible. The body becomes less sensitive to pain, and hormones that increase alertness flood the bloodstream. This may sound like a scene from *The Hulk*, but it's just part of human biology, a reaction known as “fight or flight.”

Even though those saber-tooths are long extinct, our brains are still programmed to react quickly to danger. This can be helpful in emergencies. The trouble,

according to experts, is that many kids today feel such extreme pressure in their busy lives that their stress response mechanism gets stuck in the on position—and that is anything *but* helpful. Feeling constantly stressed takes a toll on your mind and body. Doctors have linked **chronic** stress to a number of health problems, from a weakened immune system and depression to heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity.



SOLUTION

Trouble concentrating on homework after a fight with your mom? Strong emotions can throw you off. Find an outlet for your feelings, whether it's shooting hoops or writing in your diary.

Yesterday and Today

It might seem puzzling that stress is such a problem for kids today, given that in so many ways, life is much easier now than it was in the past. One hundred and fifty years ago, one in three kids didn't live past the age of 10. Those who weren't struck down by diseases like polio or measles were often **felled** by contaminated water, spoiled milk, or poor nutrition. In cities, life tended to be grim, particularly for the poor; children often had to work to help support their families. Out on the frontier, killer storms and wild animals posed constant threats. Kids spent their

days helping on the farm, and it was a privilege to attend school past eighth grade.

Life in America today is far safer. Vaccines spare us from many deadly diseases. Every kid is guaranteed the right to go to school through 12th grade. And there are programs to help the needy pay for at least some food and other basic necessities.

So if we have a lot less to worry about than previous generations did, why do we seem *more* stressed?

Some of the troubles today's kids face are not so different from problems of the past. Millions must cope with the stresses of poverty, family problems, and

dangers in their neighborhoods. Other pressures are unique to the 21st century. Academic pressure is more intense than ever before, with competition for college growing fiercer each year. Schedules are so packed with after-school activities and jobs that there is often little time to relax with friends and family. Technology allows kids to be “on” 24/7, sharing, posting, and tweeting with legions of people. And yet many kids lack time to **cultivate** the kinds of deep friendships that are truly nourishing.

What’s more, the news is filled with stories **lamenting** the fact that American students have fallen behind their peers in other countries academically, and that the U.S. is losing its competitiveness—that we are no longer global leaders in science and technology. “Then we have the huge uncertainty of our times,” says Dr. Cynthia Ackrill from the American Institute of Stress. “Kids are worried about the environment and about getting jobs.”

It’s all too much!

How to Cope

But hold on. Sit back and take a deep breath. Yes, life can be stressful. But the good news is that there are easy

ways to reduce stress. And no, you don’t have to quit the team or throw your phone in a lake.

To begin, accept that some stress is normal, even healthy. Stress makes us alert—and we perform better when we are alert. When it comes to extreme stress, though, there are tools anyone can use to calm down. Take LeBron James, who has been a basketball star since his early teens. James knows that some anxiety before a game is useful. It **invigorates** him, sharpens his focus. But too much stress is

overwhelming, so years ago, he turned to meditation. He meditates before games and sometimes on the bench between plays.

Meditation is just one of many stress-reduction tools. A good night’s sleep is another. Exercise is especially effective: It triggers the release of stress-reducing hormones called **endorphins**. It’s also important to get some face-to-face time with friends and family. Humans are social beings. We need each other to put things into perspective (getting a B isn’t the end of the world!) and remind us that we are loved. Another great way to cope is to find an activity you enjoy, something you do for no reason other than the simple pleasure of it. Maybe

it’s reading in the park. Or singing. Or drawing. Make time for this activity. It will **rejuvenate** you.

What doesn’t work? Procrastination. Binge-watching reruns of *The Big Bang Theory* or spending hours playing *FIFA 14* will, in the end, only make you feel more overwhelmed.

Remember to try these simple strategies. You might be surprised at how much easier it is to cope with whatever life throws your way next. ●



PROBLEM

“I AM GOING TO FAIL THIS TEST.”

SOLUTION

When you’re nervous, negative thoughts flood your mind. Before a big test, say positive things to yourself. Remember that you’re ready, that you can do it.



PROBLEM

“I JUST FEEL OVERWHELMED.”

SOLUTION
When we’re stressed, we take shallow breaths from our chests rather than deep breaths from our bellies. Try this: Lie down, close your eyes, put your hands on your stomach, and make sure your belly rises as you take 10 deep breaths. Better, right?

June 30, 2012

In China, the Test that Determines Your Life

By Edward Wong

BEIJING—Millions of high school graduates across China have been furiously dialing hot lines or gathering around the home computer in a nail-biter of a ritual not unlike that of waiting for a lottery number.

The number, in this case, is the score for what is generally considered the single most important test any Chinese citizen can take—the gaokao (gow-kow), or college entrance examination. High school seniors took the test over two to three days in early June. Now, the tests have been graded, the numbers **tabulated**, and the results released.

The score a student earns is believed to set the course of his or her life. It determines not just whether a young person will attend a Chinese university, but also which

one—a selection, many Chinese say, that has a crucial **bearing** on career prospects.

But debate appears to have grown more heated over the gaokao. It leads to enormous psychological strain on students, especially in their final year of high school. Widespread on the Internet were photographs taken in a classroom of students hooked up to **intravenous** drips of **amino acids** while cramming. Perhaps most shocking to the public was the story of Liu Qing, a student whose family and teachers hid from her for two months the fact that her father had died so as not to upset her before the exam.

Standardized testing is common throughout the world, and students and parents in nations like the United States, Britain, and France also complain about the weight placed on such



Students prepare to take the “gaokao,” a test that is regarded as a destiny-shaping event for high schoolers. About 9.15 million students took the exam to vie for 6.85 million college spots.

tests. But the admissions process in those countries is still considered much more flexible than in Asian nations. The emphasis on entrance exams in China, South Korea, and Japan induces widespread fear and frustration. Even supporters of the gaokao system acknowledge the level of anxiety involved. It is not uncommon for Chinese to have nightmares about cramming for and

taking the gaokao years after they have graduated from university.

Zhao Xiang, a recent high school graduate, said students’ lives before the gaokao were full of suffering: “Sometimes it was pressure from my family, sometimes it was the expectations from my teacher, sometimes it was pressure from myself. I was constantly in a really bad mood.” ●

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WRITING CONTEST

Imagine you have a friend who lives in China. He is about to take the gaokao, and he is REALLY stressed. Write a letter to or make a video for your friend, explaining what causes stress as well as healthy ways to cope with it. Draw on information in both articles. Send it to **DE-STRESS CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *Page by Paige* by Laura Lee Gullledge.

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