

Parent/Carer Stress Toolkit


A resource for parents & carers to help support their child or young person to understand and manage stress

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About this toolkit

Children can feel stressed about different things at different ages. Stress is normal for everybody, however when this stress gets in the way of normal everyday life and stop them doing things they need to or want to do, this is when they may need some help.

When a child or young person is stressed, they cannot always understand or express what they are feeling. You may notice they:

- find it hard to make decisions
- are constantly worrying
- avoid situations that are troubling them
- snap at people
- bite their nails
- pick at their skin
- are unable to concentrate
- eat too much or too little
- smoke or drink alcohol more than usual
- are restless, like they can't sit still
- are tearful or crying.

If your child is experiencing stress, there are things that you can do to help as their parent/carer. STEP have put together this toolkit to help you understand stress and how you can support your child to overcome these feelings.

Stress

What is stress?

We all know what it's like to feel stressed, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. When we say things like "this is stressful" or "I'm stressed", we might be talking about:

- Situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens.
- Our reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with.

When we are stressed the body releases hormones called cortisol and adrenaline. These stress hormones prepare the body for what is known as the “fight, flight or freeze response” and is a basic reaction to a perceived threat. It prepares the body to:

- Fight – to fight the threat
- Flight – run away from the threat
- Freeze – for the body to freeze to keep safe

From an evolutionary perspective this can be a very useful reaction to keep safe but in modern life where the threats we face are more complex and often abstract it can prevent us from dealing with stressors in a safe and appropriate way.

Stress is a very normal reaction to significant events in life such as death or illness, family relationship problems, academic pressures, financial difficulties or current events. Stress can be useful in some situations and can provide motivation to get tasks complete before deadlines (amongst other things) but when it begins to have a negative affect on a person's life or is felt long term then it may be time to get some help.

Encouraging your child to open up about their feelings and stresses

Firstly try to encourage your child to talk about how they are feeling. Talking about stress will make it seem less overwhelming. If they find this difficult or do not wish to talk, then they may benefit from writing their feelings down in a diary and sharing them with you when they feel they are ready to. Don't give up talking about feelings if it doesn't go well the first time, keep trying and choose a time when you won't be distracted and can give your full attention. You could also try using the “Cup 'o' feelings” sheet in the resource section of this toolkit. Once you have been able to talk with your child about how they are feeling, you can then begin to explore the stress they may be experiencing. Reassure your child that their feelings are valid and nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about.

Common causes of stress in children and young people

Below are a list of common causes of stress (or stressors) for children and young people. However, there are many different reasons why a young person may be stressed and these are individual to the specific young person.

- Academic stress – exams, workload, expectations of teachers and parents, self expectations
- Family stress – family issues, sibling relationships, relationships with parents / carers, divorce and separation, death and bereavement, family members with mental health issues, addiction within the family, being a young carer, financial worries, housing problems etc
- Social stress – friendship issues, peer pressure, expectations of friends, social media, romantic issues
- Environmental stress – political situations, the news, terrorism, the Coronavirus and associated social restrictions

What stress feels like

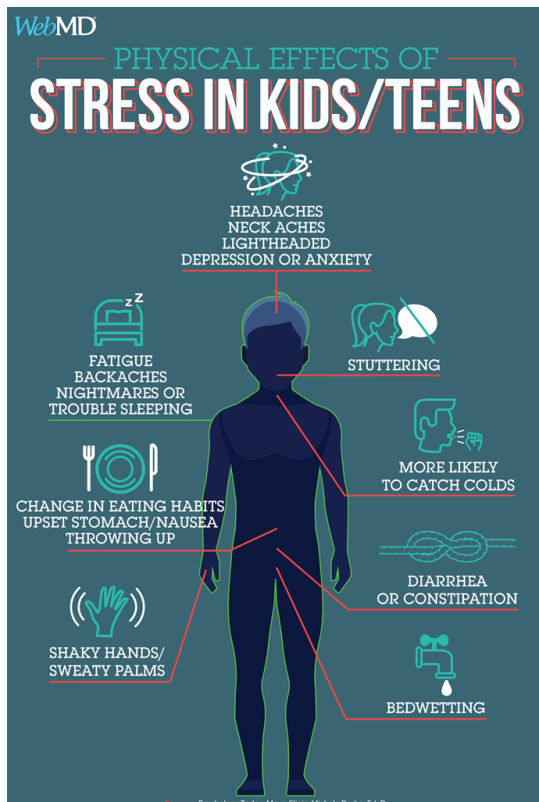
When a young person is feeling stressed they may feel lots of different things. These feelings will affect the way they think and behave. Some feelings and emotions associated with stress include:

- Feeling irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- Feeling over-burdened
- Feeling anxious, nervous or afraid
- Feeling like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- Feeling unable to enjoy yourself
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling uninterested in life
- Feeling like you've lost your sense of humour
- Having a sense of dread
- Feeling worried about your health
- Feeling neglected or lonely.

What stress feels like—the physical affects

Different people feel stress in different ways, some physical feelings of stress include:

- shallow breathing or hyperventilating
- Feeling as if you might have a panic attack
- muscle tension
- blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares
- feeling tired all the time
- grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
- Headaches
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- indigestion or heartburn
- constipation or diarrhoea
- feeling sick, dizzy or fainting



Supporting someone who is stressed

- Help them reflect on whether they are stressed. Sometimes you may be able to see it before they recognise it themselves. If you've noticed that someone seems particularly busy, anxious or unwell, you could gently let them know, and ask how you can help.
- Listen to how they are feeling. Having a chance to talk openly could help someone to feel calmer and more able to move forward, just being there for them will probably help lots.
- Reassure them that stressful situations can pass. For someone who is in the middle of a stressful time, it can be hard to see an end point. Let them know that situations change and can get better.
- Help them identify their triggers. You can be specific about things you've observed but try to stay open-minded and non-judgmental. Your perspective might be valuable, but your friend or family member could find this conversation stressful and being patient will help.
- Help them address some causes of stress, if you can. You might be able to help your friend or family member look for support around issues.
- Help them learn and practice relaxation techniques. You could help them research good relaxation techniques and find ways to practice them.
- Support them to seek professional help. For example, you could help them contact their GP, go with them to an appointment or do some research on mental health and wellbeing.
- Look after yourself. If someone around you is very stressed, you might become stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own wellbeing. Being calm and relaxed will make you more able to help someone else.

A different approach to talking about stress

If you think your young person may be struggling with stress or they have told you they are feeling stressed then discuss this with them. Help them explore their feelings and what is causing their stress. Explain why we need to reduce our stress levels and the benefits they will experience from doing so. One way to explain this is to use the bucket metaphor. Explain to them it is as if they are carrying a bucket around with them, the more stress they have the heavier the bucket is and therefore the more it will prevent them doing what they need to / like to do. Then explain that stress relief activities are like putting a tap on the bottom of the bucket, this lets out some of the water (or stress) and their bucket becomes lighter. **You may find it useful to look over the “Stress bucket” with your within the resource section of this toolkit with your young person.** This may help them identify their own personal stressors and give them a chance to think about ways they can reduce their stress levels themselves.

Ways to manage and reduce stress

Managing academic stresses

Encourage your young person to make up a schedule or timetable to make sure they have adequate time to complete school work as well as time for rest and activities they enjoy. Regular breaks will make them more productive in the long run.

Break tasks down into smaller and more manageable chunks. These easy to manage tasks will be completed more quickly than the task as a whole and so give successes more frequently. This will lead to a sense of achievement and boost motivation. It will also reduce the daunting nature of a large workload.

Exercise

Exercise is a fantastic way to reduce stress as it causes the release of “feel good” hormones such as endorphins. It improves mood and increases self esteem as well as helping us sleep.

Types of exercise include:

- Running
- Walking
- Cycling
- Yoga
- Football
- Aerobics
- Tennis

Self care

Encourage your young person to take “me time” regularly, make sure they take breaks when studying and spend time doing things they enjoy. **Colouring sheets and yoga instructions can be found in the resources section of this toolkit.**

Some examples of self care include:

- Reading
- Listening to music
- Watching a film / TV
- Having a bath
- Yoga and meditation
- Colouring
- Cooking / baking
- Talking to friends
- Playing games / jigsaws
- Cooking / baking

Meditation and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique you can learn which involves making a special effort to notice what's happening in the present moment (in your mind, body and surroundings) – without judging anything. It has roots in Buddhism and meditation, but you don't have to be spiritual, or have any particular beliefs, to try it.

Some useful videos to explain what mindfulness and meditation are and to help guide you through how to practice them can be found in the online support links section of this toolkit.

Grounding techniques and breathing exercises can also help reduce stress both on a day to day basis and during times of extreme stress such as during an exam. The more frequently these are practiced the more effective they are, practicing them when feeling calm will make them easier to do when highly stressed. **Details of these can be found in the resources section of this toolkit.**



Resources Section

In this section, you will find:

Useful worksheets

Breathing techniques

Mindfulness activities

Yoga instructions

Online support links

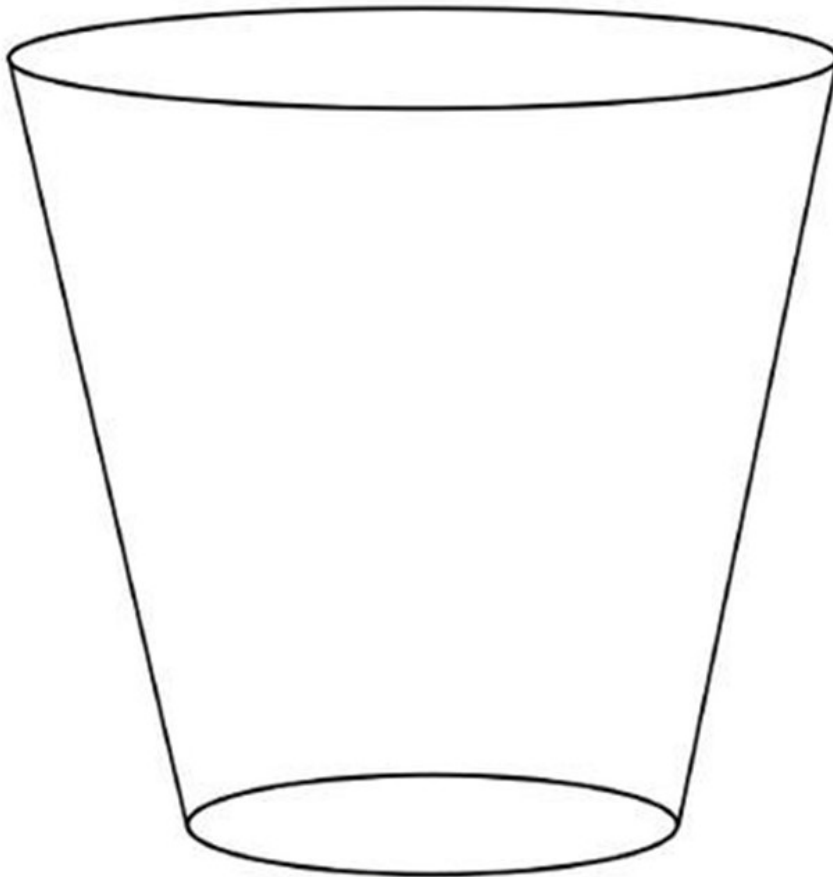
Support telephone numbers

Use this sheet to help your child identify their feelings and emotions

MY CUP-O-FEELINGS

Color inside this cup to show how much of each emotion you're feeling right now!
Use the blank spaces to pick other colors and feelings that you'd like.

YELLOW • Happy RED • Angry PINK • Hopeful PURPLE • Scared
ORANGE • Nervous GREEN • Excited BLUE • Sad BROWN • Surprised



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The stress Bucket

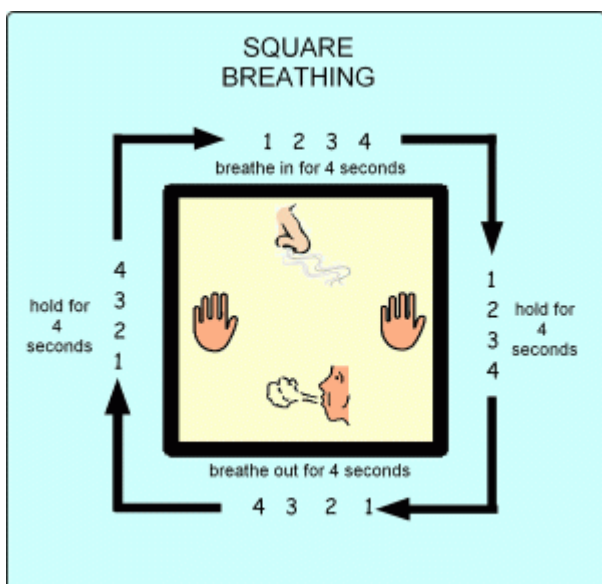
Show this to your young person and explain that:

- Water pouring into the bucket represents stressors (sources of stress)
- The tap represents ways of coping with and reducing stress in a healthy and appropriate way

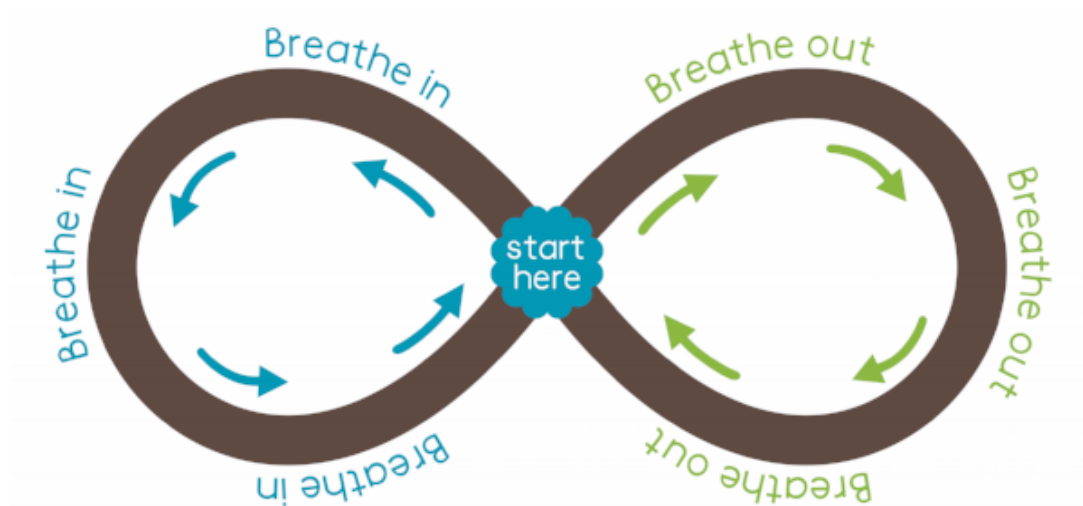
Ask your young person to label the diagram to include things they feel cause them stress and ways they think they can reduce or manage their stress.



Deep breathing techniques can be used to manage stress, anxiety and panic. They take just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. Below you will find a few different techniques you can teach your child to use. Why not try and learn them together so you can practice them regularly .



1. Begin by exhaling all of your air out.
2. Then, **gently inhale** through your nose to a slow count of 4, imagining going along one side of the square.
3. **Hold the breath** for a count of 4, imagining the second side of the square.
4. **Gently exhale** through your mouth for a count of 4 for the third side of the square.
5. **Pause and hold** for the count of 4 to complete the square.



Mindfulness Activity Suggestions



Mindfulness colouring can help improve mood and reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. Free, printable colouring sheets can be found online. We have included two colouring sheets in this toolkit but many others are available online.

Mindfulness jars (or bottles) are a great way to distract the mind from feelings of stress. Making them is a fun activity too.



Practicing a body scan meditation can help reduce stress and calm the mind.

GOOD FOR YOU, MEDITATION IS.

Set a timer for 10 min.

Sit comfortably.

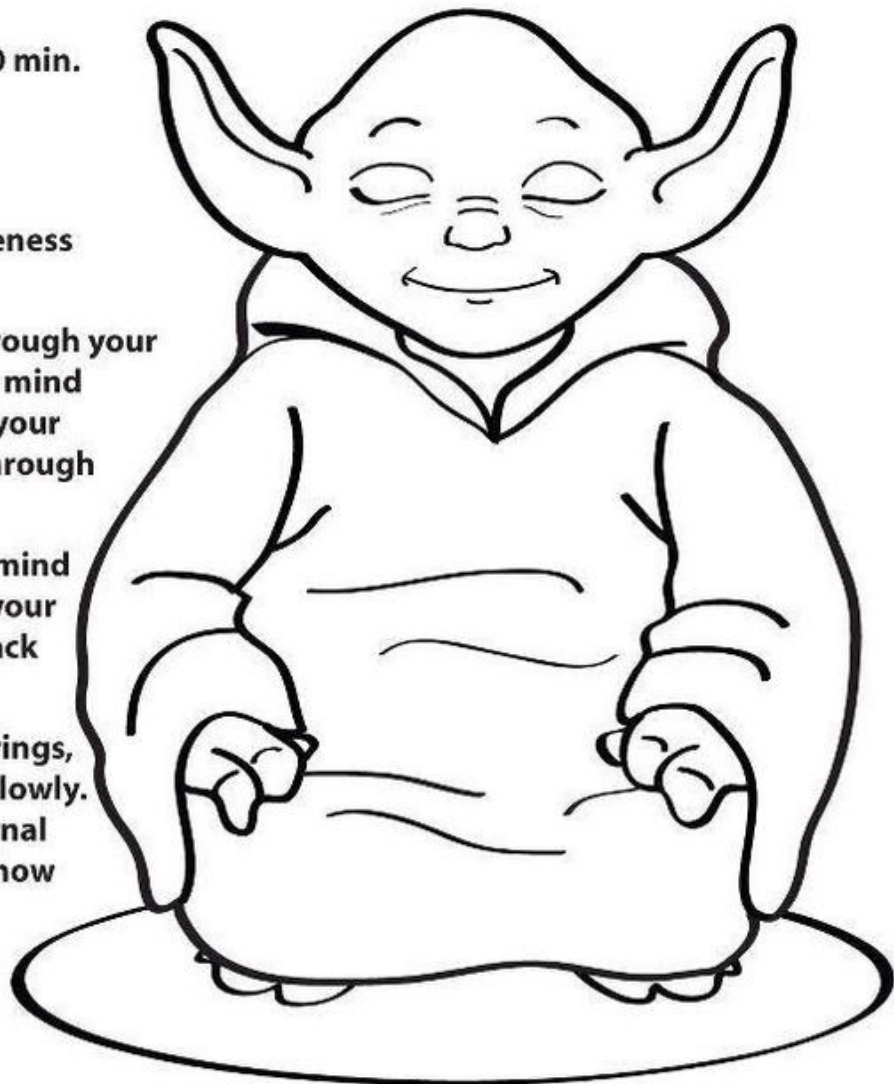
Close your eyes.

**Bring your awareness
to your breath.**

**Slowly inhale through your
nose. Focus your mind
on the sound of your
breath. Exhale through
your nose.**

**Every time your mind
wanders, bring your
concentration back
to your breath.**

**When the timer rings,
open your eyes slowly.
Keep a daily journal
and write down how
meditation
makes you feel.**



**It might be challenging at first. But
don't give up! With steady practice,
you'll soon be able to meditate just
like Yoda!**

COLOR YODA!

Grounding techniques

A grounding technique is anything that helps us re focus in the present moment. Using the senses is a great way to do this and helps reduce stress and anxiety.



One useful technique that can help when you're feeling highly stressed or anxious is to focus on your senses and list in your mind:

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel

3 things you can hear

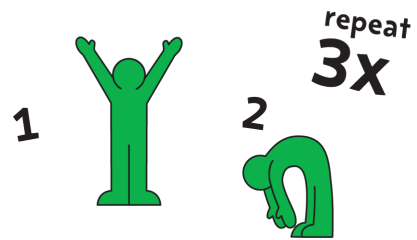
2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste

The more often this technique is practiced the easier it will be to do. Try practicing it when calm to make it easier to do when you need to.

Yoga

1. Get warmed up by raising your arms and stretching up to the sky for a count of 10, then touch your toes for a count of 10. Repeat 3 times.



2. Now make the Butterfly pose by sitting and placing the soles of your feet against one another. Hold your feet for a count of 10. Repeat 3 times.



3. Next is the Camel pose! Kneel down, stretch your arms up over your head and reach back to your toes. Hold it for 10. Repeat 3 times.



4. Dolphin pose is next – from standing, bend over and rest your elbows on the ground, keeping your legs straight. Tuck your head in and hold for 10. Repeat 3 times.



5. Finally, it's the Tortoise pose. Sit in a kneeling position, fold your body over and on to the floor, arms stretched out over your head. Hold for 30 seconds. Now repeat the circuit for 10 minutes.







Sources of support

Online support—the following organisations can provide advice and guidance for children and young people, many offer advice to parents/ carers as well.

Mind - Provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/what-is-stress/>

Childline - <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/school-college-and-work/school-college/exam-stress/>

Young minds - The UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Kooth - Free, safe and anonymous online support for young people

<https://www.kooth.com/>

Samaritans - <https://www.samaritans.org/>

The dock - The dock is a new and different way for young people to find out about services that are here to help them in Swindon.

<https://thedockswindon.co.uk/>

The Mix - Essential support for people under 25

<https://www.themix.org.uk/>

The Children's society - Support for young people and their mental health

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/young-peoples-mental-health>

NHS every mind matters - <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

Friends of STEP Facebook page—Here you can find useful resources covering a variety of topics (including stress)

<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfStep>

Useful telephone numbers

TaMHS (Targeted Mental Health in Schools Service) - work with children and young people with emotional and mental health needs such as: anxiety, trauma, emotional distress, low mood and self harm. Tel—01793 463177

CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) - Help children, young people and their families across Swindon, Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset who are experiencing more severe, complex and persistent mental health difficulties. Tel—01865 903422

Useful online videos

Headspace meditation - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_yXe_6mYTA

A beginner's guide to meditation - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-kMJBWk9E0>

The Five Ways to Wellbeing — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF7Ou43Vj6c>

The social and emotional benefits of physical activity and exercise —

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNIOsNI-o60>

Sleep: A bedtime story — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fbaoqkY0Qk>