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Parent Guide

KEEPING STRESS IN CHECK

15 simple tools for you to try with your child or teen to help reduce or relieve stress every day





Parent Guide

KEEPING STRESS IN CHECK

Dear Parents/Carers,

At Dragonfly Impact, we support schools and parents to help children and teens develop good habits for mind and body.

In this special issue of Thrive 365, we spotlight the topic of stress and the habits we can encourage our child/teen to adopt to keep stress in check.

We can't avoid stress in our lives and some of it is good for us as it helps us perform when we need to. However, too much stress or not having enough breaks from a state of stress can be harmful to physical and mental health.


Therefore getting into the habit of using strategies that reduce your stress - even temporarily - is important.

You can explain to your child/teen that everyone is different and finding healthy stress relief is about experimenting and finding things that work.

There are many ways parents and carers can use this guide. Here are 3 suggestions:

1. Try a technique yourself for at least 3 days and then invite your child/teen to join you if you feel it may help them too.
2. Try a technique yourself and ask your child/teen to try a different one. Chat about how it went.
3. Ask your child to choose a technique for you both to try for 3 days together.

We have tried to offer a variety of suggestions for different ages and different individuals. We hope you find something that works for your family.

Fly high! 

Rachael and Team Dragonfly



What is stress?

Stress is a psychological and physical response to demands or challenges, often referred to as stressors, which can come from both external sources (like work, relationships, or environmental factors) and internal sources (such as thoughts or emotions).

Stress is our body's way of telling us we need to pay attention to something important. A good explanation for children is that stress is what we feel when we are preparing for something but also when we are worried or fearful of something. Stress becomes overwhelming when we think something is too hard or scary for us to handle or when we don't get a break from feelings of stress.

The body's stress response, often known as the "fight or flight" response, involves the release of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones prepare the body to either confront or flee from a threat or freeze in the hope it will go away. These responses involve increased heart rate, heightened alertness, and a surge of energy. It becomes very hard to learn or empathise with others when in this state - so too much stress has consequences for education and relationships.

Everyone feels stress from time to time and at the right times, stress is very important to help us rise to a challenge. It's when we feel too much stress all the time and don't return to a calm and settled state, that we should think about healthy ways to keep our stress in check.

In this guide, we offer a series of suggestions of things you can build in to your day to release or relieve pressure and to prevent a fixed state of stress.

Thought Loops

Did you know?

Research refers to the 90 second emotional rule*. This is how long a 'dose' of emotion lasts in our body. Our stress response and the initial release of the hormone is automatic, we have no control, but after this it becomes a CHOICE - something we can control. Our THOUGHTS determine whether or not we continue to release these hormones. The body always reacts first, but messages from the mind determine whether this response is maintained or not. We can re-run the cycle as many times as we choose to re-start the thoughts and feelings.

So what can you try to interrupt the ongoing cycles?

1 A 90 second hug

Set your timer! A hug releases oxytocin, which works to help reverse the effect of the stress hormones. You can even hug yourself!. Try it and see if you can feel the relaxation flooding in.



2 Count backwards

Counting forwards is pretty automatic for most of us but counting backwards means we have to interrupt whatever else our brain is doing at the time. Depending on age, you could count backwards from as many as 100 or from as few as 10.

3 Give to others

Giving to others is powerful, especially in person so you see their face and make eye contact. "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." Mahatma Gandhi. Scientists believe that altruistic behaviour releases endorphins in the brain - the 'helper's high'. This can be something small like holding a door open or giving someone a compliment.

Our source/s:

*Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor 'Whole Brain Living' (2022)

**https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_hugs_are_good_for_your_health

*** <https://www.annafreud.org/resources/children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing/self-care/distraction-techniques/>

**** Dossey, L. (2018) 'The Helper's High', <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2018.10.003>.

Psychological safety

Did you know?

Being able to make mistakes without fear reduces stress. Amy Edmondson's research initially discovered that teams with better outcomes were making more mistakes. It later came to light that these teams were actually admitting more mistakes rather than making more than other teams. These results implied that feeling safe to admit mistakes leads to greater success. It was termed 'psychological safety'. That is, the "belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" Amy Edmondson, 1999

So how can parents/carers help?

4 Courage first

Adults can help to create environments that promote psychological safety in the way they approach things in their own lives. Admitting there are things you find hard but continuing to try anyway. Also modelling enjoying some things you're not very good at without focusing on improving - just having fun.

5 Teach later

**SAFETY
FIRST**

It can be easy to see our role as parents/carers to always teach children right from wrong. However, responding with compassion first when someone admits a mistake means they are more likely to come to us when they make a mistake in the future. Learning can happen later.

6 Words matter

Sometimes parents and teachers don't intend to put pressure on children but the language we use does that without us realising. Simply choosing words that give an element of flexibility, we can lower the stakes. Using words and phrases like 'explore', 'experiment' and 'give it a go' makes a task seem like something that is worthwhile for the sake of the task itself, rather than just for a positive outcome. When stress is lower, people learn better as well.

Our source/s:

Edmondson, A (1999), Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>

Breathwork

Did you know?

Breathwork has been used for centuries to promote good wellbeing. Some recent randomised control trials have also produced promising results.*

When you feel stressed, your breath tends to become fast and shallow. This limits the oxygen entering your bloodstream. Your brain tells your body that there is a threat, and your body responds in fight or flight. Focusing on longer out-breaths than in-breaths may combat this by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system.

So what can you try with children and young people?

7 4-7-8 Breathing

Completely exhale through your mouth, making a "whoosh" sound. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose as you mentally count to four. Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale completely through your mouth, making another "whoosh" sound to a count of eight.

8 Teddy Breathing

Lie on your back, place a hand on your chest, and place a teddy bear on your belly button. Close your eyes and relax your entire body. Breathe in slowly through the nose. The teddy bear should rise, but your chest should not.

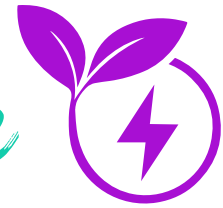
9 Lion's Breath

Inhale deeply through your nose for a few counts. As you exhale, breathe out through your mouth, sticking out your tongue and making a 'haaaa' sound with your mouth wide open like a roar. With younger children, you may even want to encourage them to roar like a lion and even move around pretending to be a lion.

Our source/s:

*Fincham, G et al (2023), Effect of Breathwork on Stress and Mental Health - <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-27247-y>

Autistic Fatigue



Did you know?

For neurodiverse children and adults, the world can be a very stressful place at times; autistic fatigue is an expression coined by autistic adults to describe the exhaustion caused by the pressure of social situations, 'masking' their autistic traits and sensory stimulation. It can lead to autistic burnout, increased anxiety and depression. It is something that is also worsened by changes in routine.*

So what can you do to help an autistic child or teen relieve stress?

10 Know the signs

Knowing the signs of autistic fatigue - and helping young people recognise the signs for themselves - is the first step in avoiding associated distress and/or burnout.

Signs can include: regression - where the child or young person is unable to perform tasks or do things that they could previously; shutting down and/or being unable to speak; covering ears or being more bothered than usual by sensory stimuli; or having stomach-aches, headaches or other physical pains.

11 Energy accounting

Energy accounting works on the principle that there are activities, situations and people who will drain our energy and others that will give us energy because we enjoy them or find them comforting. Working with the young person to make a list of these things in two columns, help them to assign a score /10 to each thing on the lists (these scores might vary day to day!). If the score in the 'draining' column is higher than the score in the 'energising' column, the aim is to plan in more energising activities.

12 Unmask

'Masking' is the term given to a person with autism minimising their autistic traits and adopting the mannerisms and behaviours of their peers to 'fit in'.

This requires a lot of effort and can be exhausting (often resulting in a meltdown when children return home after school). Allowing children and young people a safe space and some time in the day where they can let their mask drop and engage in behaviours like stimming without fear of judgement can alleviate this.

Our source/s:

*<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/autistic-fatigue/professionals>

Have hope



Did you know?

Being hopeful has been linked to improved physical health, improved mental health, higher levels of achievement and improved social wellbeing. It can also be a protective factor against stressful situations and experiences. For these reasons, it has been referred to as a type of 'psychological capital'.*

So how can we foster hopefulness?

13 Learn to have hope

Hope can be better defined as a cognitive process than an emotion because it is about our thoughts - specifically our expectations of the future. This means that hope is something that can be learned and strengthened through practice. One way to do this is by setting goals and breaking them down into small, actionable steps. Each time you achieve one of the action steps, you become more hopeful - this is closely linked to the concepts of optimism and motivation too.

14 Use the word 'yet'

Seeing mistakes and failures as a natural part of the learning process allows for hope to remain even in the face of setbacks and adversity. In addition to using the language of growth mindset (for example: 'This is hard - what can help me with it?'; 'I can't do this - yet. I've overcome obstacles before, what do I need now?') it can also be helpful to make a list of resources you have to help you through challenges. These might be in the form of practical resources, other people who have knowledge or experience that can help you, or personal resources or qualities.

15 Make it relevant

Simply knowing why hope is important to your wellbeing can help you be more hopeful! It can also help to know why your work and everyday activities are important - to have a sense of purpose and to know that your contributions make a positive impact are important elements of hopefulness. Spend some time each day or week reflecting on your 'why' and remember it's the little things you do that make a difference to those around you. A simple act of kindness for someone else can reconnect you to your sense of hope.

Our source/s:

*Hart, K., & Sasso, T. (2011). Mapping the Contours of Contemporary Positive Psychology. *Canadian Psychology*, 52, 82-92. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0023118>



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**We do hope this guide
has been useful...**

...if so, please do let us know, especially if we can help further, or connect you with a wellbeing coach. You can get in touch at info@dragonflyimpact.co.uk

Warm wishes, Rachael and Team Dragonfly

