**How parents can help youth with stress**

Teens and tweens often tell me how they talk with each other about their stress levels.

The other day I passed out an anonymous survey for reactions from teens to *Screenagers NEXT CHAPTER*, and one high schooler wrote: "It was really helpful to hear someone other than teens talk about teen stress."

When people get asked to rank their level of perceived stress, teens on average report higher levels than adults. There are many reasons teens report stress, including academic-related stress and stress from relationships with peers and family. There is also the stress of trying to feel "good enough," or trying to belong to a peer group, just to name a few.

Screen time and stress can be intertwined.

Youth tell me many **positive ways screen time helps them to cope with stress,** such as contacting a good friend to get advice, or using it to make a song. Both of these uses help them relax and feel more competent. Many talk about YouTubers they turn to for insights on "How to cope on a bad day?" or "How to approach a friend who is ignoring them?" Others tell me that they achieve instant stress reduction from watching funny YouTube videos.

On the flip side, there are many ways **screen time can promote feelings of stress.**

One of the big ones is managing social media – both the relationship issues that emerge and the sheer volume of things that demand their attention. I interviewed a 15 year-old girl in *Screenagers NEXT CHAPTER* who talked about the stress she feels from social media and all the "Snaps" (i.e., messages) she gets.

“I’ll send Streaks. At eight o’clock I’ll put my phone down, I’ll go eat breakfast. I’d come back, and I’ll have like 17 different Snaps from people. I have to make sure I’m not ignoring them. And they know I’m not ignoring them. It’s just a lot.”

While adults talk a lot about their fear that cyberbullying is a significant issue on social media platforms, far more often tw/teens tell me other ways that screen time leads them to feel stress. Here are a few of the many other examples they give:

* Seeing others out without them on a Snapchat story
* Seeing the guy they like in photos with his new girlfriend
* Seeing one image after another of the popular girls looking their best
* Having someone open their Snapchat, so they know their message has been seen but then they don't respond
* Not being invited to be in a group video game or an ongoing chat group
* Having someone not respond to a text message
* Having someone post something snarky about a post they made
* Having a guy repeatedly ask them for a photo, or meet them somewhere
* Having a friend going through a hard time and they keep texting, and they feel bad saying they have to go to bed
* Arguing with family about screen time

So often, youth tell me that immediately turning to a screen for escape is their go-to when they are feeling stressed. One 12-year-old boy said, "When I'm feeling stressed, I go on my phone, Snapchat, YouTube."

Teens are fully aware of how using screen time to cope with stress can help in the short run but often only makes things worse. For example, when they feel stress if they have to write a paper – how easy it is to escape the feeling by watching YouTube videos, only to feel greater stress as the night gets later. They have not done work on the paper and then it just spirals, with less sleep and so forth.

**Things parents can do to help youth develop skills for stress:**

1. **Help them stop and define "stress"**We all know that "stress" is the word of the day. It gets thrown around all the time. It can be helpful to do the following when your child (or yourself) says they are feeling stressed.
Stop and ask:
*"Hey, I just said stress, or hey, you just said stress, what emotion is it really?"*See what the person who said "stressed" comes up with. Maybe it is actually tired, or overscheduled, or angry about something, or perhaps even sad?
Just doing this one step, like identifying the core emotion, gives us the ability to address it with more skill and forethought.
2. **Help them identify Challenge Stress vs. Overwhelming Stress**How we help them to see stress in new, more helpful ways. Some degree of stress is healthy and desirable – this is often called challenge stress. But feeling overwhelmed by stressful feelings is not desirable.
Talking about "challenge stress" vs. "overwhelming stress" is key.
You might start by asking, "What is happening in your life that is challenging?" And then say, "There is some good stress. For example, a cross country runner might be feeling stressed about a meet on Saturday, and that keeps her making sure to practice all week. And frankly, she is excited about Saturday's race. So the stress is a good thing – motivating her to work hard, to step into a risky situation."
Overwhelming stress might look like this example, a student is in three clubs, two that meet on different days before school, one after. They have several challenging classes. Meanwhile, peer issues are happening. So now they find themselves having a hard time falling asleep.
Once they have identified what type of stress they have, challenge vs. overwhelming, then problem-solving is warranted.
3. **Let teens lead when it comes to problem-solving**When it is overwhelming stress, ask them if they have any ideas to solve the problem. When we jump in and solve, science shows that for teens, this often can increase their level of stress. This is what I did so often with my teens, but I learned much more effective communication techniques along the way. I have learned to say these two things that have made all the difference:
*"Do you have any ideas for facing this stressful situation?"
"I am here to brainstorm solutions whenever you want me to — just let me know."*If they do want your insights, still let them lead, and perhaps they will come up with answers themselves. For example, the situation above about the teen with the overwhelming stress, some solutions may include getting help in how to address the peer conflict, taking a break from one of the morning clubs, or seeing if they can swap one of the classes for one that is more enjoyable.
4. **Show them the ways you handle your stress**Parents have told me how surprised they were when they stopped to think about it – that they realized they rarely share their coping strategies for stress with their kids.
My teens know that exercise is my number one stress reliever. I am not an Iron Woman athlete, but I rely on my daily dose of movement of some kind. It makes all the difference in the world for my stress levels.
Another example is that they know that other than for texts, I have no notifications that come to me on my phone. They know that I don't bring screens into my bedroom when going to sleep because sleep is so important to me.
5. **Ensure they have "stopping points"**Gone are the days of "natural stopping points" because videos, online games, social platforms are all specifically designed to be an endless chain of events. That means as families, we need to create the stopping points.
If a 13-year-old knows that screens get put away at 9 pm, they have to learn to not keep postponing work. Having times when they need to be off social media and video games ensures they have time to recharge – such as playing with a younger sibling or helping chop vegetables at dinner time.
6. **Teach them about Growth Mindset of Personality**Studies have shown that teens do better with stress when they learn about how personalities are not fixed but change over time. Researchers measure their stress response during social situations after getting lessons on a growth mindset, and their stress hormones are lower than teens who did not get the lessons.

Here are some questions to get a discussion going this week:

1. What screen time activities can relieve stress feelings?
2. What ways can screen time contribute to stress?
3. What are other ways you relieve stress?

If you want to **host a screening** of the movie in your community, [**please fill out this form**](https://www.screenagersmovie.com/host-a-screening)**.**

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