

Too Stressed to Think?

A Teen Guide to Staying Sane
When Life Makes You **CRAZY**

by Annie Fox, M.Ed.,
and Ruth Kirschner

edited by Elizabeth Verdick

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Stress 101

KAT'S best friend, Emily, was acting weird but wouldn't tell her why. Kat was worried, and she really wanted to help. Finally, Emily said she'd talk if Kat promised not to tell anyone what was going on. Kat promised, and Emily confided something really private that she didn't want anyone else to know. Kat said the secret was safe with her.

But a few days later, their other friend, Maria, asked Kat what was wrong with Emily. "She's been so quiet and moody. I'm worried about her." Kat confessed that she knew what was up but couldn't tell anyone. Maria pressed her, saying that if Kat really cared about both her and Emily, she'd talk. Kat felt confused, like she couldn't think straight. "Fine, I'll tell you, but you have to promise this goes no further." It wasn't long before Emily learned that her secret was out. She felt betrayed; Kat felt simply awful.

MIKE was hanging out with some of the guys, playing video games and laughing about stuff that had happened at school that day. When one of his friends told an offensive joke, everybody laughed except Mike. He thought the joke was kind of sick and stupid. Mike lost track of what was happening in the game he was playing. He wanted to say something to his friends—but what? He tossed aside the game controller and announced, "I don't feel like playing anymore." But he wouldn't tell his friends why.

So, what were Kat and Mike thinking? Well, they weren't thinking, at least not clearly. Stress makes it hard to think—that's true for anybody.

Even though your brain is operational 24/7, you don't always use it effectively. How come? It's not because you're stupid, clueless, or a teen. It's because stress has an effect on your brain. It's very difficult to stay calm and in control when your stress response has been triggered.



What does the word stress mean to you?

"Like everything is pushing you, and you don't know what to deal with first."

—Charlene, 15

"It means that you have so much on your mind, and you can't get it out."

—Debra, 11

"Pain and failure. Nothing's right."

—Evan, 13

"Stress is a terrible, clawing anxiety."

—Max, 13

"It means I'm nervous about something, and I can't concentrate on anything, and I usually feel sick."

—Keisha, 14

"A burden of things that bother you."

—Steven, 14

"To me it means tired, worried, angry, and fed up."

—Aaron, 14

"Stress means never feeling like you can relax. You always have to be doing things that you feel forced into."

—Lisa, 14

"Stress means having a bad day or agonizing over stuff that plagues you, because you are in a situation where you can do little to fix it or can't fix it as fast as it needs to be fixed."

—Raymond, 16



“Stress is when you are doing too much already and anything else would make you bust.”

—Michelle, 16

“Stress is thinking about so many things at once that my head hurts, and I can’t focus on a single thought or task.”

—Kate, 18

“Stress is a tax on your soul.”

—Kory, 14

What is stress, anyway?

Stress is definitely a word you hear a lot, but what does it really mean? We define it as:

what happens to your body when it's faced with demands and pressures of many kinds. It's a push you feel inside that throws you off-balance (mentally, emotionally, and physically), often making it hard to think clearly or make good decisions.

That off-balance feeling usually doesn't come from just one source but from many. Some of the sources are external, meaning outside of you—like school, friends, bullies, parents, or difficult social situations. Other sources come from within—for example, when you feel sick, or you're in pain, or you have strong emotions that you're not sure how to handle. The result? A stress response starts inside you, shoving you out of your comfort zone where things are usually just fine (a state known as *equilibrium*) and into a whole other place that's sometimes pretty uncomfortable.

Although stress changes how you feel, that's not always a bad thing. Some stressful moments can actually be exhilarating, like when you're playing the last two minutes of a tied game, or you're up on stage singing a solo or giving a speech. At times like these, you're yanked out of your comfort zone and you have to face major pressures—and, sure, stress is a part of that. You may feel

off-balance but also pumped up and excited. The extra pressure can give you the edge you need to do your best.

And what about that tingly feeling you get all over when someone you've been crushing on finally asks you out? Or when you've just been told that you won something awesome—like a contest or a school election? Or when you're falling head over heels in love? Inside, your heart pounds, you feel shaky, and your thoughts begin to race—and you're totally off-balance. (But who's complaining, right?) You've shifted out of your ordinary experience to a level of heightened awareness. That can make you feel focused, full of energy, and alive with possibilities.



Then there's the other kind of stress—the kind that weighs you down and makes you feel moody and mean, like it's all too much to deal with. People react to it differently: Some grumble and complain; others look frantic and freaked out. Some may withdraw from family and friends; others might scream and yell. How *you* react depends on who you are, where you are, and how you feel at the moment.

For example, seeing your ex-girlfriend with another guy might be devastating today, but two months from now when you have a new girlfriend, who cares? Or, suppose your teacher announces a chemistry test for the end of the week. While you're in class, surrounded by friends who are all in the same boat, you may not feel overwhelmingly stressed—yet. But later that night, as you look over your textbook, you could feel a lot differently. Your head might race with thoughts like, “I'm totally going to fail!”

When your switch gets flipped, a stress response is triggered. Your head may fill with doubts or with memories of other times when you felt stressed or in danger. Often, these thoughts whirl out of control and just keep coming. Not surprisingly, none of this helps you get ready for your test or whatever else you're facing.

No one likes feeling overwhelmed. But often, we don't know what to do to feel better. It's safe to say that most of us *want* to feel better, if we could only learn how. This book is all about

managing stress—but before you can start managing it, you’ve got to understand it. And that means first getting familiar with life’s most typical stressors.

Meet the four stressors

Put simply, a stressor triggers your stress response. There are four major kinds: environmental, physical, emotional, and psychological. You don’t have to memorize them—just get to know them. You won’t be tested on this!

1. Environmental: These occur outside of you but have an effect on how you feel inside and out. For example, when:

- a sudden rainstorm leaves you soaking wet at the bus stop
- air pollution hurts your eyes and makes it hard to breathe
- extreme cold or heat affects your comfort level
- loud music hurts your ears, making it difficult to concentrate
- a crowd jostles you or seems to be closing in on you
- traveling in dangerous weather conditions puts your safety at risk
- neighborhood violence makes you feel scared and unprotected

Depending on where you live or what you do each day, you may come into contact with noises, smells, bad weather, traffic, crowds, rude people, or other forces beyond your control. These stressors often feel like an indirect hit that throws you off-balance.

2. Physical: These are more like a *direct* hit. For example, say you trip and fall on your face—that’s a physical stressor. Or suppose you wake up with the flu, and you feel like you’ve been rolled over by a tank. Or maybe you’re irritable but you’re not sure why, and then you remember that you haven’t eaten or even slowed down for a drink of water. Physical stressors may be mildly annoying or

go so far that they take a major toll on your health, depending on their severity and your reaction to them. Examples:

- itchy or sunburned skin
- lack of sleep
- thirst or dehydration
- extreme hunger
- illness, injury, or pain
- burnout

3. Emotional: These are unexpected pressures that leave you feeling confused, surprised, upset, hurt, angry, or even excited. You're thrown off-balance, you don't know where you stand, and you're not sure what your next step should be. For instance:

- changes in routine (a new class schedule or after-school activity)
- other people's behavior (someone who never paid attention to you before starts noticing you)
- unwanted changes to your appearance (a bad haircut, weight gain or loss, zits)
- special recognition (you win an award, and everyone makes a fuss)
- a bad grade (this is especially difficult when you studied hard and expected to do better)
- technical difficulties (the computer you're working on crashes, or you can't get access to the Internet)
- disappointments (like when you lose a competition or a friend lets you down)
- scheduling conflicts (you've been invited to two cool events on the same day, and you have to choose one)



- losses (when a friendship comes to an end, you break up with your boyfriend/girlfriend, or you get cut from a team)
- fights (with family members, friends, or boyfriends/girlfriends)

Although these stressors can be tough to deal with, they only last a short while, and soon you regain your balance once again.

4. Psychological: These stressors stem from *unresolved* emotions (for example, something's been eating you up inside, maybe for months or years, but you haven't known how to deal with it). Feelings of anger, fear, sadness, regret, or shame seem to move in and make themselves at home inside you. Maybe they stick around so long that you barely remember where they came from or what your life was like before things got so difficult. Psychological stressors can lead to, or be signs of, deeper medical issues, such as depression or an eating disorder. Some examples include:

- serious family problems (constant arguments, not being able to depend on family adults)
- social pressures (being excluded from a clique, feeling isolated)
- unresolved relationship issues (with family, relatives, friends, boyfriends/girlfriends, or teachers)
- ongoing academic troubles (poor test scores, learning difficulties)
- constant bullying or harassment

There's one other form of psychological stress: chronic worrying. Humans may not be the only mammals who worry (there is some evidence that whales and elephants worry too), but we are definitely the ones who get the gold medal! You, but not your cat, can remember bad experiences from the past and then start worrying that the same thing will happen again. As a human being, you're also likely to worry about things that have never happened to you personally but could. Or to agonize over things you "could have" or "should have" done differently but can't change now. Stress can

lead to worrying, and in turn, worrying creates more stress. (For tips on coping, see page 53.)

What are *your* stressors?

A stressor always nudges, pushes, or drags you out of your comfort zone and puts you on alert. That “Uh-oh!” feeling happens right after your brain recognizes that something has just shifted and you’re now experiencing physical or emotional discomfort. Good-bye equilibrium—your stress response has just kicked in.

Do any of the following stressors sound familiar to you? This is what the teens we surveyed said about the stress triggers in their lives and how they react to them.

Stressors

deadlines · multitasking · **social pressures** · homework · strangers · **the future** · personal problems · **nagging** · everything that has to do with school · **my past** · rumors · **term papers** · teachers · **abrupt changes** · loud noises · fights with friends · **my health** · my weight · **college decisions** · sports · **conflict** · confrontation · **failure** · too much work · **tests** · guys · girls · my ex-boyfriend · **my ex-girlfriend** · sex · **an overloaded schedule** · late buses · **time-management issues** · worries · **new environments** · overly forceful coaches · **mean people** · popularity · my mom · my dad · **my stepmom** · my stepdad · **my sister** · my brother · **grades** · expectations · **rules** · world events

Just as there are a variety of stressors, there are also a variety of reactions that teens say they typically have when they’re feeling off-balance.

Feelings/Reactions

sad · moody · quiet · I act weird · uptight · crazy · crabby · I don't want to cooperate · I pick fights · anti-social · I feel like screaming · it's like I'm foaming at the mouth · bitchy · irritable · angry · I feel like crying · I catch an attitude · I feel like tearing things up · I swear · I cut myself · I buy more stuff · cranky · frustrated · edgy · testy · I talk too fast or too much · withdrawn · lonely · exhausted · grumpy · I hide my feelings · I get very worried · I feel disappointed in myself · I act like I have PMS · annoyed · I lash out · argumentative · aggressive · impatient · easily agitated · depressed · upset · mean · tense · very emotional · I complain · I overeat

Have You Reached Your Limit?

Check to see if you recognize any of the following emotions/behaviors, all of which can be signs of severe stress. Do you:

- feel irritated, annoyed, or angry most of the time?
- often have hurt feelings?
- constantly worry about big and small issues?
- cry frequently, without knowing why?
- find that you can barely eat, sleep, or get through the day?
- get into lots of fights—verbal or physical?
- often feel sad, lonely, or completely alone?
- take dangerous risks, like driving too fast, taking drugs, drinking alcohol, or doing other things that hurt your body and mind?

If you answered yes to any of these, you may have reached your stress limit, which can leave you feeling continuously off-center and out of control. What can you do? Get some help. Find an adult you trust: a parent, teacher, school counselor, or religious leader. You don't have to go it alone—there are people who can and *will* help. For more tips, see Chapter 10.

You still have choices

Once you're stressing, who's in charge? The answer: *you*. But how can you possibly keep your balance and make good choices when you're not thinking clearly? Well, it's not easy.

One key to learning how to manage stress in healthy ways and get back on track is *recognizing that you're feeling off-balance*. Get in the habit of checking in with yourself by asking, "Am I feeling stressed right now?" or "Is this another one of those stressors in my life?" Know that you do have choices about how you react.

Everything you do is a choice, whether it's deliberate and conscious, or impulsive and unconscious. Good choices make the world a safer, more just, and less stressful place. Poor ones create stress and unhappiness, whether they affect you, your friends and family, your school, your community, or the wider world. Need proof? Just check the front page of today's newspaper for the latest bad choices people have made and their consequences. No doubt about it, choices matter.

Gandhi, the father of democracy in India, said, "Be the kind of change you want to see in the world." That's a powerful statement. It means that your choices matter—they affect not just your own life but the lives of others too. When you feel positive, calm, and balanced, you're definitely going to make better choices. In other words, you'll be more likely to do the right thing—and that can be a great stress reliever. You'll feel better and so will the other people in your life: win-win.

This book is designed to help you create and maintain a less stressful lifestyle. But you're not going to get there just by reading the chapters. Really think about what you're reading and practice being more aware of your thoughts and feelings. In each chapter of the book, you'll find tools for de-stressing and opportunities to act on what you're learning. Try them. Here's your first challenge:



THINK ABOUT IT: What are your everyday stressors? What are your *biggest* ones? Why? How do you usually feel or react when faced with stressors big and small?



TALK ABOUT IT: Your stressors can change throughout your life. Chat with a parent, grandparent, or someone else who has known you well since you were younger about some of the things that *used* to set you off but don't anymore. What has changed for you? Talk about what's gotten better (or worse) now that you're a teen.



WRITE ABOUT IT: Writing is a great way to become more aware of who you are and how you behave. With greater self-awareness, you'll begin to make more conscious choices and manage your stress. Any personal writing that you do (like journaling) is private. No one should ever see what you've written, unless you choose to share it. That's why, when you write in a journal, you can give yourself permission to be totally honest. Get any kind of journal you like (a notebook, sketchbook, or blank book) and write about a personal experience you've had with stress. Did you have to make a choice? What was it? What was the outcome?