



Tips for Talking to Youth Who are Under Stress

Stress is not easy to define

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines stress as “a condition characterized by symptoms of physical or emotional tension” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Stress can also be called anxiety. Because stress is individualized to each person, the conditions related to feeling stressed are hard to define. Stress can escalate quickly to unwanted behavior, and often without warning.

In a stressful or crisis situation, youth may not be able to manage the situation. He or she may also have disabilities that increase their inability to manage their own behavior when under stress. Parents are aware that there often is not a perfect response or method that works 100 percent of the time to change or resolve unwanted behavior. There are, however, effective strategies that may prove useful and effective in calming and soothing your youth’s anxiety in a stressful situation.

When does reaction to stress become a problem for your son or daughter?

Some stress is a normal part of life and it can be helpful in motivating youth to do well and helping parents to set high expectations. Stress can be a positive influence. Severe or chronic stress, however, can become overwhelming and lead to challenging behaviors. Some parents may have dealt with their youth when stressful events trigger strong emotions that make him or her fearful, depressed, or jittery. Those feelings alone can easily sabotage confidence and increase that feeling of needing to be defensive.

Feelings of helplessness that may accompany stress for your youth can lead to a “fight or flight” response. These challenging behaviors can really disrupt everyday life activities, not just for your son or daughter who is experiencing the stress, but for others around them. This level of intensity quickly becomes a problem and needs immediate attention.

Stress becomes a problem for your youth when it:

- Becomes threatening to self or others
- Disrupts normal life activities
- Leads to challenging behavior

Effective tips for dealing with your youth’s stress

- **Provide non-confrontational support.** It is important to remember that your son or daughter under stress is likely feeling the need to control the situation. To keep them from escalating into an unwanted behavior, reassure your youth that you are there to **help keep them safe**. In a stressful situation, your son or daughter may feel unable to manage themselves, but may still want to try. If you take over, unless they are causing bodily harm to themselves or others, you are taking control away from your youth, which may accelerate the unwanted response. Remember that as a parent, your goal is to help your son or daughter regain control.
- **Stay calm and positive.** Don’t be threatening or challenging. Be mindful that facial and body expressions may send an unintended message to the youth in distress. Keep a relaxed body, with arms at rest. Staying an arm’s length away may also help.

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- **Listen and do not force engagement.** Many youth escalate situations with inappropriate verbal behavior that can be addressed later when everyone is calm. Verbal engagement and response to agitated behavior may actually make the behavior more intense. It may not be a good time to try to convince the youth to do something different unless they are demonstrating unsafe behaviors.
 - **Be nonjudgmental; use as few words as possible.** Speak in a soft and measured voice. Sometimes it helps just to repeat what you are hearing them say, for example, “I hear you saying that you are really upset.” Do not attempt to reason or problem solve in that moment.
 - **Offer support to the youth that can lead to immediate relief.** Tell your youth what you want them to do, not what they are doing wrong. Provide them with choices. For example you could say, “I hear you saying that you are really upset. Would you like to take a walk or go to another place to be alone for a while?”
 - **Be proactive, not reactive.** If you know ahead of time that your youth might be showing signs of elevated stress in certain situations, take the time to offer support in a collaborative style. Offer to role play some possible incidents and plan together how to manage them. Because stress is unique to each person, identifying and responding to it in a preplanned and individualized way could be helpful.

Skills needed to manage stress that you can teach your youth with disabilities

Youth who are in distress want relief, but it is also helpful to understand what might trigger those stressful situations for your youth. There are certain skills that are needed to manage stress:

- Language skills (processing frustration or anger through words)
- Ability to wait before responding
- Capacity to identify and express emotion appropriately
- Ability to recognize and accept responsibility for their behavior

Youth who do not have these skills will struggle with managing their own behavior. If your youth has a disability that impacts language skills and expressing emotions appropriately, he or she is more likely to behave inappropriately under stress and escalate the situation. To help your child, you should be aware of the skills they need to self-manage behavior.

Some of these skills can be taught at school through regular education classes and social skills curriculum. If your youth is in a special education program and has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), make sure there are instructional goals and objectives aimed at teaching skills for handling stress. At home, parents may be interested in accessing parent education classes, mental health providers, and other trained behavior intervention specialists to help their youth learn skills needed for stress management.

It is important to remember that while these skills can be taught, maturity and disability may impact successful outcomes.

In summary

Research verifies that youth with disabilities are more vulnerable to certain situations that contribute to challenging behaviors. While there is no specific recipe to preventing stress, developing a good relationship with your youth will be helpful for that “in the moment” response.

Try the four tips to guide your responses. Your youth will want to know they are being heard and understood, and that may take time. They also want to be safe. Knowing when to get help is also essential. If your efforts at calming your child are unsuccessful, take action to keep the situation under control. Having a plan in place for these crisis moments will help prevent more reaction. Safety should never be compromised.

References and resources

Cronin, S., Becher, E.H., Christians, K.S., et al. (2015). *Mental Health eReview: Parental Stress*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

Emotions and Behavior

kidshealth.org/en/parents/emotions

Teens suffer from high stress and need your help to cope

www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-race-good-health/201402/5-tips-helping-teens-cope-stress

Tips for Talking to Children and youth after traumatic events: A guide for parents and educators

store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA10-DISASTER/SMA10-DISASTER-09.pdf

PACER Children's Mental Health and Emotional or Behavioral Disorders Project

PACER.org/cmh