

Mental Health and Wellbeing Newsletter

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Stress Awareness

Stress Awareness Month is an annual event that's been observed in April since 1992, it gives us a platform to open up conversations about stress, signpost people to the right support and help us prioritise our mental health.

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical strain and tension. It is our body's response to pressure, to going through something tough, challenging or demanding.

Stress in Children Ages 4-7 Years Old

This age group under stress might show signs of regression. For instance, children that have been successfully potty-trained may wet the bed again or have toileting accidents. A child may start sucking their thumb again. Children may have trouble paying attention to you. They may have temper tantrums and separation anxiety. Battles about eating and bedtime may be reoccurring.

Young school-age children often show their emotional stress in physical ways. Complaints of their tummies hurting is a common reaction. This has some truth to it. When we are stressed, our bodies make chemicals that have physical effects. We call this the fight or flight reaction, a surge of hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Those hormones can make a stomach feel funny or hurt. Additionally, stress lowers the pain threshold.

Stress in Children ages 7-10 Years Old

Stress is often not a familiar term for children. It could be that they express distress with words like worried, confused, annoyed, or angry. Sometimes, it comes across in what they say about themselves or the situation. This can include negative self-talk such as "I'm dumb," or "nothing is fun anymore." They may alter their behaviours based upon the setting, seeming fine at home but acting out at school or in their sports activities.

Some indications that your child could be feeling stressed are:

- Complaining of stomach-aches or headaches
- Mood swings or outbursts
- Changes in their sleep pattern, or bedwetting
- Trouble concentrating and school refusal
- Becoming withdrawn



Stress in Tweens Ages 10-13

This age group is in that uniquely tenuous and stressful stage of late primary school and transition to secondary school. Young people feel stressed by pressures to do well in school and to succeed, feel stressed with body image and appearance, and feel stressed for fear of making mistakes.

In young people stress may show as:

- feeling sad
- being irritable, losing their temper easily
- finding it hard to keep their mind focussed on school work.

Children in this age group may also be less likely to talk about their worries and fears. This doesn't mean they aren't there.

A recent Children's Commissioner survey asked children what they felt stressed about:



Whilst we do not know what the extent of the shouting that children talked about was, it was the first thing some children raised when they thought of being stressed. Even if some of these tensions may be what would be considered potentially 'healthy' family arguments, we know they can also weigh on children's minds.

I think my child is stressed, what should I do?

- Listen to them about how they feel.
- Help them to break down big tasks or problems into smaller ones can help them feel less overwhelmed.



- Talk them through the situation, focusing on the positive parts. Give children a say in the plans when possible. Listen to what they think and how they feel. If they feel stressed, let them know it's OK and they can cope.
- Help children feel safe, loved, and cared for. This is the best way to offset stress. Feeling close to you and knowing you love and accept them is more important than ever. Provide routines, like the same bedtime, eating a meal together, or being there after school. Routines provide a rhythm and let children know there are things they can count on.
- Teach coping skills. Children feel better when they know there are things they can do for themselves to offset their stress. Children of all ages can learn and practice calm breathing and meditation.
- Help them take a break from stress. Make time to play, draw or paint, spend time in nature, read a book, play an instrument, be with friends and family. These activities are more than just fun but also help children to feel positive emotions that offset stress.
- Advocate for your child. Sometimes, stressors are outside of your child's control. In these cases, it can be helpful for parents to engage with the stressor directly (for example, contacting school staff about bullying).
- Try the 3 3 3 rule.
Ask them to name 3 things they can see, identify 3 sounds they can hear and move 3 different part of their bodies. It's an enjoyable activity that distracts children from their worries and refocuses them on the here and now.

