Back-to-School

NOT

Back-to-Stress
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
Your source for science-based stress management information

CONTENTMENT

We value opinions of our readers.
Please feel free to contact us with any comments, suggestions or inquiries.

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Contentment is a quarterly newsletter published in March, June, September and December with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. Contentment is archived online at stress.org. Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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AIS Daily Life Stress Board

Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury–Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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Got stress news? Let us know @ais_stressnews
Observing someone who is stressed — especially a coworker or family member — can have an immediate effect upon our own nervous systems. A separate group of researchers found that 26% of people showed elevated levels of cortisol just by observing someone who was stressed. Secondhand stress is much more contagious from a romantic partner (40%) than a stranger, but when observers watched a stressful event on video with strangers, 24% still showed a stress response. (This makes us question whether we, as happiness researchers, should watch *Breaking Bad* before going to sleep.) Read more... [here](#).

New research shows that stress causes people to sweat special stress hormones, which are picked up by the olfactory senses of others. Your brain can even detect whether the “alarm pheromones” were released due to low stress or high stress. Negativity and stress can literally waft into your cubicle. Read more about it, [here](#).

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**Make Yourself Immune to Secondhand Stress**

Individuals who view stress as debilitating tend to either over or under react to stress whereas those with a “stress is enhancing” mindset have a more moderate cortisol response to stress and are more willing to seek out and be open to feedback during stress, which can help them learn and grow for the longer-term. Read more about it, [here](#).

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**Stress Can Be Good If you Know How to Use It - Harvard**

Extensive research focuses on the causes of workplace-induced stress. However, policy efforts to tackle the ever-increasing health costs and poor health outcomes in the United States have largely ignored the health effects of psychosocial workplace stressors such as high job demands, economic insecurity, and long work hours. Using meta-analysis, we summarize 228 studies assessing the effects of ten workplace stressors on four health outcomes. We find that job insecurity increases the odds of reporting poor health by about 50%, high job demands raise the odds of having a physician-diagnosed illness by 35%, and long work hours increase mortality by almost 20%. Therefore, policies designed to reduce health costs and improve health outcomes should account for the health effects of the workplace environment. Read more about it, [here](#).
September can be a time of stress as schedules change, students go back to school, and families get busy with new commitments. In fact, families are under high levels of stress throughout the school year. Mothers have traditionally been among the most stressed of demographics, with one APA survey showing that one in three mothers report they have experienced a great deal of stress in the last month (8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale) compared to only one in five single women. Similarly, the most recent APA stress survey found that parents are more likely to say they are not doing enough to manage their stress—31% vs. 20% of non-parents. This survey also found that adolescents are even more stressed than their parents, reporting that their stress levels during the school year are far higher than they believe to be healthy—5.8 on a 10-point scale, where 3.9 is what they estimate to be healthy. The summer months found stress levels to be significantly lower at 4.6. (Adults’ stress levels rated at 5.1, which is still widely agreed to be too high.)

Where is all this stress coming from? Much of it comes from the increasing demands of the school environment. Parents are expected to be more involved now than in previous generations, requirements for getting into college are increasing, all leading to an anxious and stressed population of parents, kids, and college students. While it may not be practical (or even possible) to pare down all of the demands that create this stress excess, there are several effective coping strategies that can help. Cutting out stressors when possible, coping with the activities and expectations that are vital to school success, and learning to manage existing stress in
healthy ways can make the difference between manageable stress and the chronic stress that has been shown to deplete cognitive performance and destroy long-term health.

School should be an enjoyable part of life. More importantly, coping strategies that students learn to manage school stress can set their patterns of coping in future decades. The following tips can help stressed families and students of all ages learn to maximize school success while practicing healthy stress management habits. These tips are directed toward high school and college students, but parents of younger students can use them as a guide for themselves when applicable, and to help their elementary and middle school students learn effective habits early on.
1. Manage Time Wisely

One simple way to manage stress is to prevent it from entering your life. This means not over-committing, which will inevitably lead to challenges in maintaining balance when your schedule gets too busy. In addition to carefully weighing each commitment (and backing out of time drains that simply aren’t worth the space they take up in your schedule), learning to manage your study time is vital as well. Allow yourself enough time to study, and then some. Schedule in sleep time and leisure time, or you will miss it. Put everything on your calendar so you can see where your time is going, and what you might need to say no to, so you can say yes to the things that matter the most to you.

2. Get Organized

Create systems, and you’ll find that your life runs more smoothly. This means eliminating clutter when possible, finding a place for everything, and storing things so that you can find them when you need them. It also means putting all of your deadlines on a calendar, having a system for taking notes, and generally staying on top of things whenever possible. If you find that you’re falling behind in being organized, chances are there is an app, an article, or a book that addresses the exact type of organizational challenge you’re facing.

3. Create A Good Study Environment

Having a quiet place where you can focus can make or break a study session. If you don’t have a comfortable, somewhat private, and distraction-free spot for studying, now is the time to create one. If you’re not in an ideal study spot, utilize stress reducing and sound minimizing technologies such as a white noise machine or app, noise-cancelling headphones, or soft background music. Avoid the temptation to turn on the TV or listen to loud music, as your brain may experience more stress when dealing with competing signals.

4. Work With Your Strengths

Discover whether you are an auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learner, and try to incorporate your learning around this whenever possible. For example, if you are an auditory learner, listening to audiobooks can make a literature class much easier. If you are a visual learner, converting a lecture to flash cards can be extremely helpful. Similarly, if you work best in the mornings, try to schedule study time first thing, especially on the weekends. Study yourself to learn how you learn, and then use this information to your benefit whenever possible.
5. Know Your Weaknesses

If you tend to procrastinate until your anxiety levels propel you to a stress-induced frenzy, you may want to enlist support in changing this habit. Although people often think they work best with a procrastination-based burst of energy, this type of extreme stress can only be sustained short term, and almost always has long-term consequences. Likewise with other self-sabotaging habits; become aware of your weaknesses so you can work around them.

6. Get Enough Sleep

The amount of sleep you get sets the stage for your entire learning experience each day. This is because we become cognitively fatigued when we’re sleep deprived. It becomes more difficult to memorize new information and recall what we have already learned. We also become more reactive to stress when tired. Set a bedtime and stick with it. Safeguard your 7-8 hours of sleep. Nap if you need to. Just get the sleep you need. Studies show that a lack of sleep hinders performance more than being legally drunk.

7. Practice Visualizations

If you feel stressed thinking about assignments and tests, visualize yourself being successful academically. Be specific in your visualizations, and imagine yourself confidently answering each question correctly. When your motivation to study wanes, visualize how you will feel when you have met your goals.

8. Maintain Resilience-Building Habits

Healthy habits like getting regular exercise, daily journaling, and practicing meditation can build resilience toward stress, making it easier to manage life’s challenges when they arise. It may seem counter-intuitive for busy families to take time for activities that may not seem vital to school success, but these stress-management skills are key to leading a balanced and more productive lifestyle.

*Elizabeth Anne Scott is About.com’s Stress Management Expert and author of 8 Keys to Stress Management, part of W.W. Norton’s 8 Keys to Mental Health series*
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The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

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Your own distress feels awful… but seeing stress on your child’s face or hearing it in his or her voice feels even worse!

You recognize these feelings oh so well—overwhelmed, anxious, exhausted, restless, irritable, hurting, mind spinning with less-than-helpful thoughts. It doesn’t matter how big or small or “real” the threat is; to your child some challenge seems larger or stronger than his or her ability to cope. Something feels out of control and hopeless. And underneath it all is the universal human go-to negative thought: somehow he or she is not “enough.” (Sound familiar?)

The school year certainly dishes out plenty of opportunities for all children, no matter how young or old, to worry about measuring up, fitting in, keeping up, and succeeding. Their sense of control and confidence are challenged daily.
How can you help your child feel stronger when the going feels too tough?

Address your own stress first! Thanks to mirror neurons in the brain, humans have an amazing ability to recognize and sense each other’s emotions. While this is essential for empathy, it can cause children to feel stressed and even perceive they are the cause of their parent’s stress. It’s important to “put your own oxygen mask on first” before helping your child. Role model self-care. Calm yourself, get clear, and radiate a grounded, safe presence.

Build self-awareness. You and your child, no matter how young or old, can learn to better recognize the early signs and symptoms of distress, giving you power to make adjustments on the fly and take back control.

Ask him questions about what he notices physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually (connection to purpose, others) when the stress starts to mount. Ask her what she notices when you are stressed and share what you notice. Explore what calms (not numbs) those feelings. Building awareness is the prerequisite to developing self-regulation.

Breathe! Slow, intentional breathing is one of the fastest ways to calm the brain and body, restoring blood flow to the frontal lobe and making it much easier to get strong and creative. This teaches your child that she has more control than she feels and creates time to choose responses. Make this fun! (link to video) Practice, practice, practice!

Validate her feelings and empower her strength with change talk. “I hear you are really distressed, what do you think would be helpful?” Do not jump in to fix it! And in your own unease do not dismiss it. Ask him how he’s handled something like this before and what works best for him. Get curious, ask “what if” questions- not ones that solve, but ones that get your child curious about how things work and what makes him/her strong.

And convey your faith that he or she really does have the power to take control—maybe not of the situation at hand, but definitely of his or her response to it! Perception of control, even if it’s just control of their own experience, can dramatically decrease the negative impact of stress.

Imagine a world made up of adults who learned better stress management as kids!
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