

Talk It Up! Column

Back to School: Coping with Stress

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Take one minute and think of a recent time that you were stressed about something. Got it? I bet that didn't even take you a full minute to think of. This is true for everyone, from elementary school students to middle and high schoolers to college and grad school students to fully grown and well-functioning adults.

The insidious nature of stress is one of our culture's current greatest challenges. And new research is even showing that stress is contagious at a psychological level, for people from many backgrounds. In fact, this high presence of stress is seen in all schools, from those that serve primarily students facing major economic and social inequality to those who serve students of more advantaged families with highly competitive expectations...and everything in between. These high stress environments are making it difficult for schools to create positive learning environments, which in turn leads to greater stress, giving rise to a vicious cycle. As many youth try to deal with these stressors without any examples of or training in positive coping strategies, some turn to substance use in an attempt to self-medicate. In fact, the relationship between stress and adolescent substance use, particularly alcohol abuse, is well established.

So, what can we do? I think we can all agree that stress, no matter what stage of life you are in, is unavoidable. If that's the case, how can we help students make healthier decisions when dealing with it? What will help them handle stress in a more positive, productive way? What will allow them to move on from stressful situations and moments instead of being buried under them?

The most important thing we can do is *model* healthy coping strategies. Youth learn from what they see others doing, especially parents and trusted adults. If they see you coming home from a stressful day at work and grabbing a beer or glass of wine, they'll internalize that alcohol is an acceptable way to handle stress. That's not to say that you can never have a drink, but be a role model for doing so safely, not as a primary method of coping. Instead, try other options first. Take advantage of opportunities to discuss and make plans for future stressful situations. Here are some ideas:

- Try deep breathing or meditation exercises. There are lots of great guides for this on the internet!
- Exercise regularly. It could be anything from taking a walk to yoga to weightlifting, just get those endorphins flowing.
- Make time for music, art or other hobbies that are enjoyable and distracting.
- Get enough sleep! Eight and a half hours a night is recommended.
- Change up your diet. Try to decrease junk food, sugar and/or caffeine consumption.
- DO NOT generalize. If you get a poor test grade or have a bad day at work, that does not mean that you won't get into college or that you'll be fired. Take things one event at a time so that they don't spiral out of control.
- Write down something good that happens to you every day. Focusing on the positive, even if it's small, fosters strong mental health.

- Set aside time for yourself every day. Take a nice, long, hot bath or something else that relaxes you.
- Don't run from your problems. Avoiding them will just make them bigger.
- Use your family and friends. Talk through your problems and see if they can help. Being able to confide in people is protective against many stressors.

And if none of these are working and you still feel overwhelmed by the stressful situations you are facing, it may be worth taking the next step. Instead of turning to unhealthy options, like substance use, visit a mental health professional, like a counselor or psychologist. They can give you some extra guidance on how to handle your stress. Teach your children that you do have control over the stress and choices you make in your life and model "practice makes perfect" in learning how you can best handle it for yourself.