

## Teen Stress

Do all teens experience stress? You bet they do! Several agencies and organizations have conducted surveys of teen populations to get data on how stressed teens are, what issues are most stressful for them, and what they are doing about these issues. One question is found in all of them: “Are you stressed out?” The answer is universally, “Yes.”



A November 2009 national survey by the American Psychological Association (APA) revealed that stress continues to be a top health concern for U.S. teens. Fourteen percent of children and 28 percent of teens said that they “worried a lot or a great deal,” and nearly half (45 percent) of teens ages 13 to 17 said that they worried more and their stress had increased in the last year. A 2013 survey from the American Psychological Association found that teens and young adults were the most stressed age group in America.

What is causing teens to be stressed? Teen stressors can be placed into five categories: stressors caused by family issues; stressors related to school; peer pressure stressors; stressors caused by national and world issues, and stressors created by violent acts. Let’s look at a few stressors in each category.

### Stressors Related to Family Issues

Family stressors can create many difficulties in the lives of teens. Violence, illness, and conflicts with parents are among the family-related stressors that some teens deal with.

#### Abuse and Violence

Escaping violence in our society is almost impossible. According to a report by the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), teens ages 12 to 19 experienced nearly 1.6 million violent crimes in 2007 (the last year for which data is available). This figure includes 179,056 robberies and 57,511 sexual assaults and rapes.

Abuse is an underreported source of stress for many teens. The U.S. Office of the Surgeon General estimates that approximately 906,000 kids are maltreated—either by neglect or abuse—each year. More than 60 percent of child victims were neglected, 20 percent were physically abused, 10 percent were sexually abused, and 5 percent were emotionally maltreated. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 35% of households where domestic violence has occurred have children under age 12 living in them (BJS, 2007, the last year for which data is available).

Many of the coping mechanisms abused kids develop are negative ones. Kids who have been maltreated grow up seeing themselves as victims. They may go on to

victimize others. Children who have been abused, especially by neglect, have a higher incidence of developing criminal behavior patterns.

### **Parent/Teen Conflicts**

Teens have had conflicts with their parents since the dawn of time. Many of these conflicts occur because teens are pushing for more freedom, one of the first steps in the long march to maturity. Conflicts arise when teens want more freedom than their parents feel they can handle. In an effort to protect kids from mistakes they themselves made when they were teens, parents sometimes impose strict rules that they expect their kids to comply with. Teens frequently ignore the rules or actively rebel against them.

Conversely, teens can be stressed if their parents are not involved enough in their lives. Birthdays, school changes, the onset of puberty, receiving a driver's license, graduating from high school, and starting to date are all events that teens feel are important transitions in their lives. Teens whose parents ignored these events are twice as likely to report daily stress. They are also much more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as drinking, drug use, and dangerous driving.

### **Divorce**

More than half of the marriages in the United States end in divorce. One significant teen stressor created by divorce is guilt. Kids may feel that it is their fault when their parents divorce. The stress of divorce has been shown to have effects later in life as well. Teens from broken homes have a higher incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, become sexually active at an earlier age, and frequently are unable to develop relationships leading to happy marriages.

### **Illness and Death**

A major illness or the death of a parent or sibling is extremely stressful for a teen. Dealing with grief, wanting to be supportive for the remaining parent or both parents, and still coping with all the other stresses of teen life can be overwhelming. Teens feel that they should be the supporters when all they really want is to be supported.

### **Chronic Illness**

The stress that having a chronic illness places on a teen is incalculable. Fortunately, most teens are perfectly healthy and only have to deal with short-term illnesses. Occasionally, though, teens do develop chronic health problems. Initially, they have difficulty believing they are ill. Then they get angry. Eventually, the reality of the situation sinks in and they begin to cope.

Many chronically ill teens become depressed and decide that death is preferable to the treatment for their diseases. They disregard or actively rebel against treatment regimens recommended by their physicians. In some respects, this may be a form of suicide, a not uncommon result of depression.

### **Stressors Related to School**

Grades, activities, and other aspects of school life can cause distress for teens. The following are some of the issues that all teens deal with during their school years:

### **Grades**

A 2007 Associated Press/MTV survey found that school is the most commonly mentioned source of stress by teens ages 13 to 17.

The push for good grades is often driven by things other than the love of learning. In order to participate in most sports programs and be recruited to play college sports, students must maintain high grade-point averages.

Teens also believe that being admitted to top schools depends on getting high grades. They are correct. Good high school grades, difficulty of a student's high school course selection, and scores on SAT or ACT exams are among the most important factors for college admission.

Being accepted to a prestigious university is important to teens who are concerned about future earning power. They believe a degree from a famous school will help them get a higher-paying job when they graduate. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the average salary offered to 2010 graduates is \$48,351. A July 2010 report by CNN says that the average graduate from a top school makes nearly \$120,000 per year.

### **Activity Overload**

Activity overload is another source of stress for teens. It takes more than grades for a teen to get into a good college or university. But how much more? College admission committees look at students' extracurricular activities to get a feel for what their interests are. Teens may be carrying the push to appear well-rounded too far. Many are packing so much into their lives that they are truly stressed out. Learning to say no diplomatically is difficult, but it is perhaps one of the greatest skills one can learn.

### **Deciding on Colleges**

Making decisions about which college to attend, or whether to go to college at all, is stressful for many teens. Should you try for a certain college because "that's where Mom/Dad went"? Should you follow your friends to the local community college? Should you apply to ten colleges or two? All of these questions weigh heavily on teens, even those still in middle school. While bucking parental expectations and peer pressure in making decisions about college may create stress, doing what you really want to do may be worth it.

### **Peer Pressure Stressors**

Many teens feel a great amount of stress in dealing with their peers. Dating, fitting in, and handling conflicts with peers are among the most stressful situations that can confront teens.

## Dating

Causes of stress among dating couples vary. It is not unusual for both members of a couple to be busy with school, sports, and work. They feel that they have to “steal” time to be with each other. In some cases, one partner is busier than the other. The less busy partner feels that he or she is given second place to everything else—a very stressful situation for both people.

Dating violence was listed as a major stressor for teens. Dating violence is the intentional use of abusive tactics and physical force to obtain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner. According to research published by the U.S. Department of Justice, one in ten teens was involved in a physically abusive relationship and two to three out of every ten teens was involved in an emotionally abusive relationship in 2008 (the last year for which data is available). The abuse can range from threats to actual physical force of a sexual nature. Dating violence can be a single episode of date rape, but the term is more often used to describe the physical abuse that some teens repeatedly endure in the mistaken belief that their partner really loves them and is using physically abusive sex “for their own good.”

## Bullying

The term “bullying” is used to describe a variety of behaviors. Teasing, name-calling, intentionally not inviting someone to a social event, ignoring someone, or gossiping about him/her are all forms of bullying. At its extreme, bullying can involve physical contact such as hitting, pinching, pushing, slapping, or other forms of assault. A 2010 survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (<http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/2010/index.html>) interviewed more than 43,000 high school students from private and public institutions nationwide. Half of the students said they had bullied someone during the past year, and nearly half said they had been bullied, teased, or harassed by their peers.

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Since teens have started to use the latest communication technologies, a new type of bullying has emerged: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying involves the use of e-mail, text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal-polling Web sites to support deliberate and hostile behavior by an individual or group. Bills are now pending in Congress to make this form of harassment a criminal offense.

## Belonging

Wanting to be accepted as a member of a group is a normal wish. Not being accepted by the group, or not knowing whether you will be accepted, is very stressful.

For some, needing to belong somewhere is so important that they join gangs. Kids who join gangs usually do so to escape other stressors in their lives. Unfortunately, by joining a gang, they create a new set of problems that may be much more serious than those they wish to escape from.

## **National and World Issues Stressors**

According to a 2005 study by the Washington Post (the last year for which data is available), most teens predict that another terrorist attack as big or bigger than 9/11 will occur sometime in their lives, and one in four expects a nuclear war. They also are stressed by concerns about pollution, AIDS, and drug abuse. National and world issues are especially potent stressors because most teens feel that there is little or nothing they can do about them.

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