

PROJECT YOUTH WELLNESS

**WEEK 8: UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND
HEALTH RISK BEHAVIORS**

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WHAT IS "STRESS"?

According to the American Psychological Association, stress is "the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave."

Let's break this definition down even further:

- **Physiological Response** = a physical reaction in the body, like increased heart rate, sweaty palms, nausea, tension in muscles, or dry mouth.
- **Psychological Response** = an emotional reaction, like nervousness, worry, fear, anger, irritability, frustration, or depression.
- **Internal Stressors** = things that come from within you, such as negative thoughts, feelings, or physiological processes.
- **External Stressors** = things that happen around you, such as people, places, or situations (like conflict in a relationship, major life changes, or societal events).

DID YOU KNOW?

Stress is not always unhealthy or bad for you. In fact, stress is often what motivates us to meet a deadline or make a change. Some stress can make us stronger in the future. For example, exercise is putting stress on your heart and muscles to make them stronger and help you develop and grow.

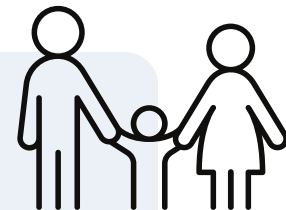
However, if the stress is beyond the point that we are able to manage it, or if something unexpected happens, that is when it can become damaging or even be considered "toxic stress" (when it leads to lasting harmful physiological changes in the brain and body).

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE STRESSORS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE YOUR AGE EXPERIENCE?





What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to traumatic events or stressful experiences that occur during childhood, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. These experiences can have long-term effects on mental and physical health, increasing the risk of chronic diseases, substance use, and behavioral challenges (CDC, SAMHSA).

How Can We Address and Prevent ACEs?

Build Supportive Relationships

- Positive, stable relationships with caregivers, teachers, and mentors can buffer the effects of ACEs and promote resilience (CDC).

Who in your life provides support and encouragement? How can you strengthen those relationships?

Encourage Open Conversations About Mental Health

- Talking about stress, trauma, and emotions in a safe environment can help reduce stigma and provide children with coping mechanisms (SAMHSA).

What are some healthy ways to express emotions and process difficult experiences?

Reduce Household Stress and Instability

- Economic hardships, domestic violence, and substance use in the home contribute to ACEs. Connecting families with resources like counseling, financial assistance, and support programs can reduce stressors (NIDA).

What community resources are available to help families facing challenges?

Recognize the Signs of Trauma and Seek Help When Needed

- Children and adults affected by ACEs may show signs of anxiety, depression, or difficulty in relationships. Early intervention and trauma-informed care can improve long-term outcomes (SAMHSA).

What are signs that someone may need support due to past trauma? How can they access help?

A high ACE score does not define you.

Your ACE score is an indication of the amount of toxic stress you endured as a child. This alerts you to some statistical indicators of health risks and allows you the opportunity to **prevent** potential consequences.

Now what?

You are already **resilient** in many ways. Think about a difficult situation and describe it below:

Self-Care

What kept you going?

Support Systems

Who helped you?

What other thoughts or actions made things better?

How else can I build resiliency?

Mental Health Care

A trauma-informed counselor can work with you to develop a personal plan for addressing any the effects of ACES in a safe, supportive environment.

Physical Health

The mind and the body and interconnected. Proactively manage any health issues by seeking out your primary care provider.

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

On the previous page, you listed stressors that you and others your age experience. Maybe you listed some things like...

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| SCHOOLWORK | HEALTH PROBLEMS |
| FAMILY ISSUES | LEGAL ISSUES |
| RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS | BULLYING |
| BODY IMAGE | LIVING ENVIRONMENT |
| PEER PRESSURE | IMMIGRATION STATUS |
| GANGS IN MY COMMUNITY | SEXUAL ORIENTATION/IDENTITY |

These are just a few of the things that people have to deal with in life. That's why learning about stress, coping, and self-regulation is so important! That way, you can equip yourself to deal with stress in a healthy way.



TYPES OF STRESS

Stress comes in different forms. Review the types, and list some examples of each type in the space below.

POSITIVE STRESS

Short-term stressors that are related to healthy development

POSITIVE STRESS
(EX. STARTING A NEW JOB, UPCOMING DEADLINES, TAKING A NEW CLASS):

TOLERABLE STRESS

Stress caused by a severe situation that still comes to an end or eases over time, allowing recovery

TOLERABLE STRESS
(EX. BEING IN A CAR ACCIDENT, DEATH OF A LOVED ONE):

TOXIC STRESS

Extreme, frequent, unpredictable, or prolonged stress, without additional supports

TOXIC STRESS
(EX. NEIGHBORHOOD VIOLENCE, NOT HAVING ACCESS TO ENOUGH NUTRITIOUS FOOD):

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

WHAT IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL?

Often, stressors are outside of your control. Things like family problems, violence, legal problems, health problems, and other barriers in life can be very frustrating and uncertain.

Look back at the stressors you identified on the previous pages. Now, place them into the categories below based on what you think is in your control vs. out of your control:

WITHIN MY CONTROL

NOT WITHIN MY CONTROL

Review your lists again. You probably listed a lot of the same things under "**Not Within My Control**" that fell into the category of "**Toxic Stress.**"

Whether you experience things like violence in your community, not having enough food or shelter, immigration or citizenship issues, long-term financial issues, chronic illness, or other stressors you may have listed, many of these things can be outside of your control. Often, these things are due to barriers or systemic issues that feel impossible to change or manage.

Take a moment to brainstorm with others about how you can potentially handle things you think of as not being in your control. Are there any aspects that you *can* control?

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

WHAT IS WITHIN YOUR CONTROL?

After discussing your lists from the previous page, you may have realized that the point isn't being able to get rid of these stressors, but instead being able to focus on what you can control: **your response**.



Think about the example of a big storm approaching. You can't stop the storm from coming, but you can be prepared by having a plan and using resources available to you like bringing an umbrella, going indoors, or wearing a jacket. In the same way, you can be mentally prepared to handle the stressors that will come into your life by preparing yourself to manage them using your self-regulation and coping skills.

Self-regulation **does not mean** never experiencing stress or being able to "fix" every problem. Instead, it means recognizing the way stressors make you feel and being able to use your own tools as well as seeking help from outside resources and supports to manage the impacts of these stressors.

Do you have supports in place right now? If so, what or who are they? If not, what kind of support do you need?

How do you respond to stressors now? Are there any tools that you use to handle them?

UNDERSTANDING STRESS



PHYSICAL EXPERIENCES OF STRESS

Positive stress and tolerable stress are common. When you experience a "stressor"—something threatening, harmful, or challenging—your body has a natural physical response. Specifically, stress signals to the brain and body that something is going on and that you need to be alert. In response, the brain triggers the release of stress hormones (*cortisol* and *adrenaline*) to activate the sympathetic nervous system's "**fight or flight**" response.

Have you ever heard of the term "fight or flight"? What does it feel like in your body when you are experiencing stress?

This is a physiological response that the body experiences to alert you that you are in "danger" and prepare you to avoid the situation (flight) or remove the stressor (fight). This could feel like sweaty palms, racing heart rate, or even "zoning out." Afterward, the parasympathetic nervous system kicks in to help your body calm down and recover from the stressor, referred to as the "**rest and digest**" response.

What thoughts are going through your mind when you experience "fight or flight" or physical symptoms of stress?

What helps you calm your body when you are feeling physical symptoms of stress?

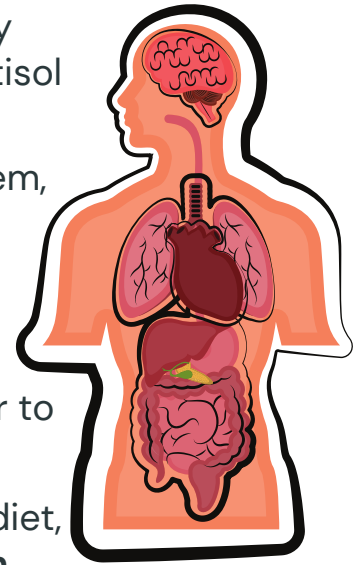
UNDERSTANDING STRESS

IMPACTS OF STRESS ON THE BODY

Toxic stress is bad for us. It is not healthy for our bodies to be constantly exposed to stress (especially stress that is unpredictable or severe) without having adequate supports or coping skills. Unmanaged stress has many short-term and long-term effects on our body and overall health. Let's review some of the effects of **unmanaged stress**:

Remember, stress triggers the release of **stress hormones** (cortisol and adrenaline). When stressors are not dealt with, the body remains in a constant state of activation (with elevated cortisol and adrenaline). This increases the risk for...

- Heart problems due to pressure on the circulatory system, such as stroke, heart attack, or high blood pressure.
- Issues with the body's ability to get rid of bodily inflammation, which can lead to asthma, ulcers, and digestive problems.
- A weakening of the immune system that makes it harder to fight off illnesses.



Stress can also affect health behaviors like sleep, appetite/diet, and substance use. **How do you think stress affects health behaviors?** List some examples below:

KNOWING THIS, WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO MANAGE STRESS?

COPING SKILLS

Managing stress is important in order to reduce the risk of experiencing negative outcomes, like disease and illness, and to promote wellness by being able to respond to stress in a healthy way. Let's take a moment to reflect on the ways you usually cope with stress or other challenging feelings or situations.

HOW DO YOU COPE?

Try out this questionnaire to help you reflect on what you tend to do when coping with a difficult situation. Score each item using the following scale:

1 = I don't do this at all 2 = I do this a little bit 3 = I do this a medium amount 4 = I do this a lot

- | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I turn to school, work, or other activities to get my mind off of things. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I say to myself, "This isn't real." |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I use alcohol or drugs to make myself feel better. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I get emotional support from others. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I give up on trying to deal with it. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I take action to try to make the situation better. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I refuse to believe that it has happened. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I do something to get my mind off things (exercise, shopping, sleeping, etc.). |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I get help or advice from other people. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I use alcohol or drugs to get through it. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I try to see things in a different light or find the positive in them. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I criticize myself. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I try to come up with a strategy for what to do. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I get comfort and understanding from others. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I look for something good in what is happening. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I make jokes about what is happening. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I just accept the reality of what has happened. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I express my negative feelings. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I try to find comfort in my religion or spirituality. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I think hard about what steps to take. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I blame myself for what happened. |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | I pray or meditate. |



COPING SKILLS

So, what do your answers mean? The skills you identified can each fit into different categories. Check out each category below and put a star next to the ones that you think are "adaptive" coping skills (things that are healthy or helpful). Put an "X" next to the ones that you think could be "maladaptive" coping skills (things that are unhealthy or even add to the problem).

Taking Action:

Ex. I try to come up with a strategy for what to do.

Distraction:

Ex. I turn to school, work, or other activities to get my mind off of things.

Substance Use:

Ex. I use alcohol or drugs to make myself feel better.

Denial:

Ex. I say to myself, "This isn't real."

Humor:

Ex. I make jokes about what is happening.

Seeking Support:

Ex. I get comfort and understanding from others.

Shutting Down:

Ex. I give up on trying to deal with it.

Positive Reframe:

Ex. I look for something good in what is happening.

Acceptance:

Ex. I just accept the reality of what has happened.

Spirituality:

Ex. I pray or meditate.



Source: <https://local.psy.miami.edu/faculty/ccarver/scIBrCOPE.phtml>

USING HEALTH BEHAVIORS TO COPE

Often, the behaviors that we use to cope with stress are actually **health behaviors**!

Health behaviors are behaviors that relate to your health, whether in a healthy or unhealthy way— things like sleep, exercise, eating habits, mindfulness, or substance use. Use the space below to either write or draw which health-damaging or health-promoting behaviors you engage in the most **during stressful times**. Rank them from most frequent behavior to least frequent behavior.

HEALTH PROMOTING

EX. I go on a jog to blow off some steam
(physical health)

HEALTH DAMAGING

EX. I stay up really late thinking about the
situation (not getting enough sleep)

Are there certain times or situations where you are more likely to engage in a health-damaging behavior than a health-promoting one?

Substance use is a common health-damaging behavior among teens. When you engage in substance use, are you aware of how you are feeling beforehand? Mark on the scale below how aware of your feelings you are when engaging in substance use.

I have a hard
time identifying
my feelings



I am frequently
aware of how I
am feeling.

In the upcoming sessions, you will learn self-regulation skills to become more aware of your feelings and develop healthy coping behaviors in order to manage stressors and promote wellness in your life!