



JM Mental Health  
Independent Child and  
Adolescent Psychiatry



# Stress in children and teenagers



## Did you know?

*All stress is not necessarily bad. Think of it as a signal telling us to get ready.*

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## Introduction – stress in children and teenagers

Stress is a natural reaction to feeling under pressure or threat, of not being able to control or manage a situation. It's something we all experience, especially children and adolescents as they navigate growing up, finding themselves in new and challenging situations. First of all, it's important to say that all stress is not necessarily bad. Think of it as a signal telling us to get ready. For your child, stress can help them focus, complete tasks (like getting ready for school), meet deadlines (homework), rise to a challenge (learn a new skill). That helps build resilience and inner strength.

Stress becomes a problem if it overwhelms a child so they can no longer cope, lasts for a long time or becomes very intense. This not only makes it hard for them to enjoy life but can cause burnout and harm their mental and physical wellbeing.

## Causes of stress

Growing up is a naturally turbulent time for children and young people. Stressful situations can include:

- Schoolwork and exam pressure
- Relationships (friends and romantic)
- Life changes (a new school, moving house, illness)
- New experiences (such as learning a new skill or sport)
- Little or no control over a situation
- Family conflict
- Lack of sleep

## Signs of stress

- Physical symptoms include trouble sleeping, tiredness or exhaustion, tense muscles, nausea, headaches, sweaty palms, grinding teeth, abdominal cramps
- Emotional symptoms include feeling irritable, angry, scared, restless, overwhelmed
- Behavioural symptoms include change in eating habits, avoidance, difficulty concentrating, lacking motivation, withdrawing from others



### Did you know?

*Signs of stress include behavioural symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, lacking motivation, withdrawing from others.*

## How to support your child

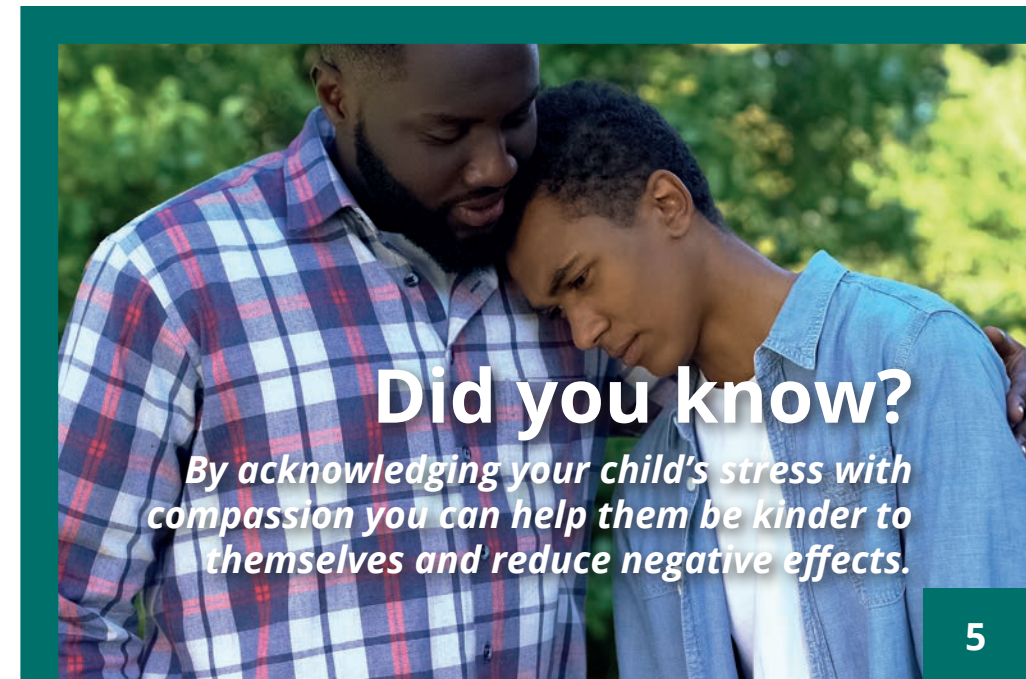
### Acknowledge their stress

Let them know that you have noticed they are stressed and are there to support them. Feeling that they have been heard and understood (but not judged) gives a child positive support. Your compassion can help them be kinder to themselves and reduce the negative effect of stress.

### Try and discover what has caused their stress

This can make things easier to deal with – either by helping them to work out coping strategies (eg if they're always running late in the morning, they need to get things ready the night before and/or wake up earlier) or talking through the stressful problem, particularly if it's something that your child has no control over (eg divorcing parents, world events such as Covid).

Don't be tempted to do everything for your child or adolescent. They may need help working out what to do but they will benefit from learning how to prepare themselves.



### Did you know?

*By acknowledging your child's stress with compassion you can help them be kinder to themselves and reduce negative effects.*

## Help them to handle stress

Work with them to try and reduce the pressure they're feeling. For example, if the stress is due to revising for exams, plan a study timetable.

Encourage them to do things that they enjoy, such as hobbies or activities. It might be spending time together or having time on their own, listening to music, going for a bike ride, painting. Anything that encourages positive emotions can negate the impact of stress.

### Establishing and keeping routines

With so many changes happening in their lives, knowing that they can count on something being the same every time is helpful. Daily routines provide structure and support.

### Encourage healthy lifestyle choices

This won't get rid of what's causing the stress but can help your child cope with and handle the effect of stress. Encourage them to:

- Be physically active – this not only improves physical health but is a great mood lifter. Exercise also helps them to relax and burn off the stress hormone, cortisol
- Get outside – spending time outdoors, especially in natural surroundings, has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression and promote a sense of wellbeing
- Eat healthily – a balanced diet with a mix of fruit and vegetables, lean protein, whole grains helps to support healthy gut microbiome
- Relax before bed – encourage good sleeping habits and put away electronic devices as least half an hour before bed and either switch off/put on silent to avoid checking them through the night
- Sleep well: children and teenagers need at least 9-10 hours of sleep a night. Not getting enough sleep is one of the biggest causes of stress in teenagers (see our Sleep leaflet)
- Meditation and breathing exercises: spending 5 to 10 minutes quiet, calm and focussed trains your child's mind to slow down, relax, and stay positive.



## Did you know?

*Establishing daily routines provide structure and support with stress management.*

## When stress becomes too much

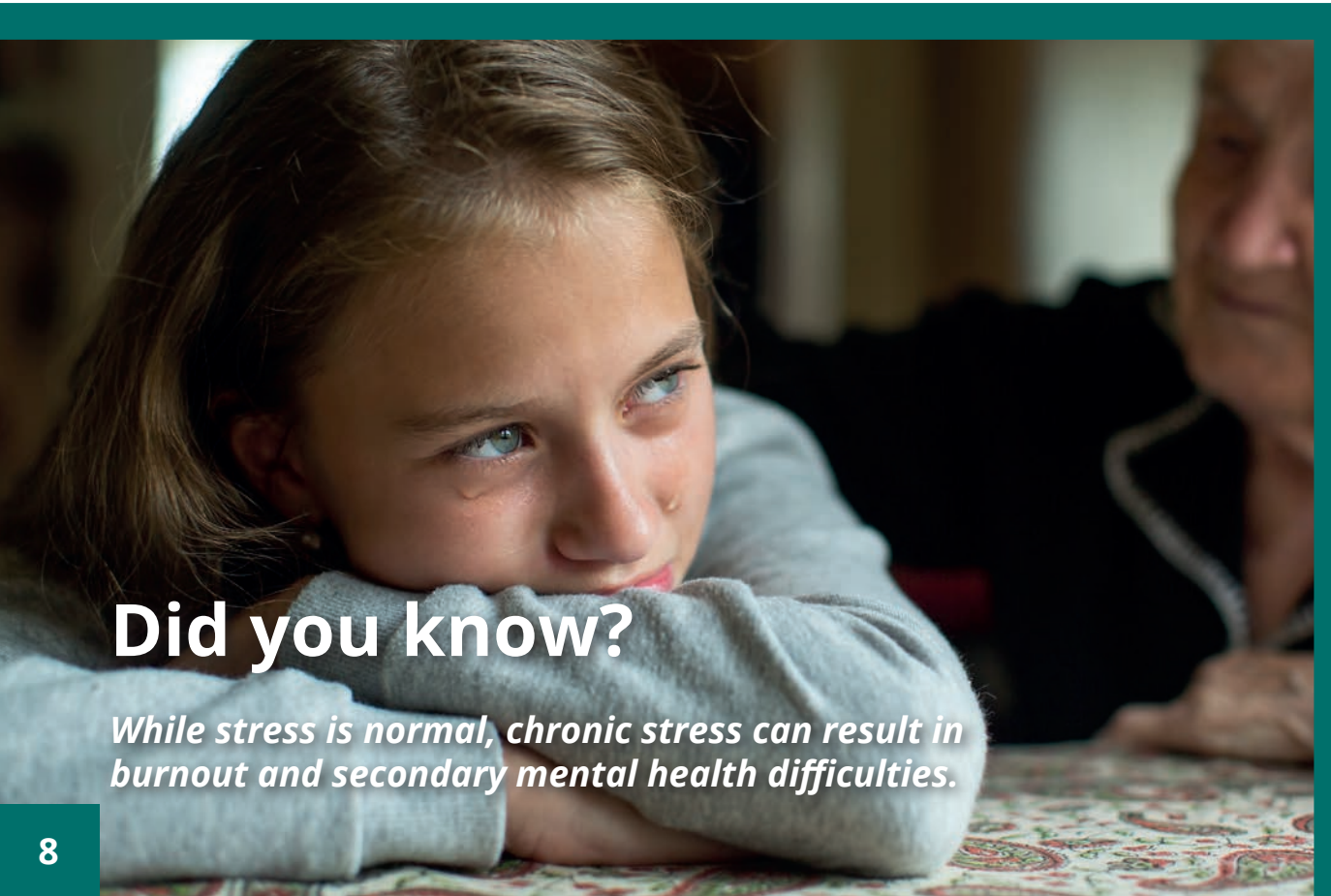
**“Prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems and increase the risk for stress related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years” (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019).**

Chronic stress occurs when there is no release from the stress. Left untreated, chronic stress can have a negative impact on a child’s physical and mental wellbeing, increasing the risk of them developing emotional, behavioural and cognitive problems (such as reduced impulse control, poorly developed functioning skills, a lack of self-regulation, trouble learning at school, difficulty forming healthy

relationships, higher instances of developing depressive disorders and PTSD). It can also trigger serious disease (such as diabetes, cancer, heart problems, obesity).

So while stress is normal, chronic stress can result in burnout and secondary mental health difficulties. This is when the intervention of a trained professional, such as a child psychiatrist is crucial.

We are here to support and care for you as a family. We work with children and teenagers, along with their families, diagnosing and treating those who are experiencing chronic stress. As child psychiatrists, we have medical degrees which allow us to prescribe medication (if appropriate) as well as delivering therapy. If you have concerns, do get in touch. We can chat over the phone and establish what the issues are.



## Did you know?

*While stress is normal, chronic stress can result in burnout and secondary mental health difficulties.*

## Useful resources...

[www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/stress/struggling-with-stress](http://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/stress/struggling-with-stress)

[www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/stress-bucket-activity/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/stress-bucket-activity/)

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/young-people/coping-with-stress-for-young-people](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/young-people/coping-with-stress-for-young-people)

[www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Teenagers-With-Stress-066.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Teenagers-With-Stress-066.aspx)

[www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/06/five-tips-to-help-teens-cope-with-stress/](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/06/five-tips-to-help-teens-cope-with-stress/)

## Perceived scale of stress

The questions in this scale ask about your child's feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, they will be asked to indicate how often they felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and they should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times they felt a particular way; rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

### STEP 1:

For each question choose from the following alternatives and add the score into the grid on the right:

**0 never, 1 almost never, 2 sometimes, 3 fairly often, 4 very often**

### STEP 2:

Reverse your scores for questions 4, 5, 7, and 8. On these 4 questions, change the scores like this:

**0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1, 4 = 0**

### STEP 3:

Now add up your scores for each item. **TOTAL:** .....

Scores ranging from **0-13** would be considered low stress.  
 Scores ranging from **14-26** would be considered moderate stress.  
 Scores ranging from **27-40** would be considered high perceived stress.

The Perceived Stress Scale is interesting and important because your child's perception of what is happening in their life is most important. Consider the idea that two individuals could have the exact same events and experiences in their lives for the past month. Depending on their perception the total scores could put one of those individuals in the low stress category and the total score could put the second person in the high stress category.

	Score
In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	
In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?	
In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	
In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	
In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	
In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	
In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?	
In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	

**Disclaimer:** The scores on the self-assessment do not reflect any particular diagnosis or course of treatment. They are meant as a tool to help assess your child's level of stress. If you have any further concerns about their current well-being please get in touch.



# JM Mental Health

## Independent Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

### **Trust your instincts as a parent or carer**

We understand that this is a very stressful time for everyone. We want to support you and work with you to improve the situation.

We make no judgements. We listen to you and your child. We make absolutely sure we understand what is going on. Remember, you are not alone. This is a safe place. We are here to support and care for you all.

If you have concerns about your child's moods and behaviour, then you need to act sooner rather than later. Please discuss any concerns with your clinician.

***Dr Julia Moss***  
***Founder of JM Mental Health***



Helping children and teenagers and their families with mental health difficulties.

[www.jmmmentalhealth.co.uk](http://www.jmmmentalhealth.co.uk)