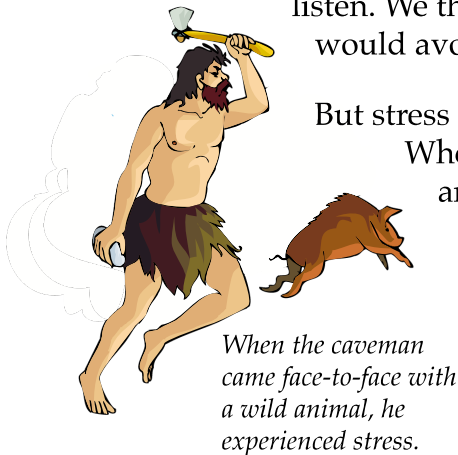


Unit 3: Stress: Finding the Balance

Introduction

Few of us would identify **stress** as a condition or feeling we enjoy. We wouldn't say, "Stress really makes me feel good!" or "I can't wait to be stressed out!" Often when we do feel something we call *stress*, we try to get rid of it. We try to relax it away by listening to music. We try to sweat it away by playing a sport. Or we try to talk it away by getting a friend to listen. We think of stress as something to avoid—as we would avoid a disease or discomfort.



When the caveman came face-to-face with a wild animal, he experienced stress.

But stress is not all bad. In fact, stress can save our lives. When the caveman came face-to-face with a wild animal, he experienced stress. His body responded to the life-threatening situation by becoming ready to fight. His muscles gained energy, and his vision and hearing became sharp. If he chose to run from the animal, the energy he gained from stress helped him run faster and farther.

When we face difficult or even life-threatening situations, we experience stress. *Stress* is our response to any situation that makes a demand on us. When we feel stress, our bodies go on alert. When we noticed that car barreling down the road at us, our bodies were stressed and went on alert. We gained a little extra energy to help us make our way from danger. The mother who was able to lift a car off her child responded to the stressful situation with incredible strength.

We do not face as many life-threatening situations as the caveman did. However, stress still helps us in our everyday lives. Stress can help us achieve success in any challenging situation. When we take an exam, stress can help us think clearly. When we play a sport, stress can help us play our best. When we act in a play or give a speech, stress can help us perform better than we ever have. Stress can even help us show our cleverness and our funny sense of humor on a first date.



Stress can help us play our best.

Stress, however, becomes harmful when it overwhelms us. Stress can make us go blank as we look at the questions on an exam. Stress can cause us to lose our focus as we play a sport or game. Stress can leave us speechless on a first date with someone we want to impress. In more extreme cases, stress can make us sick and even cause death.



Stress becomes harmful when it overwhelms us.

Stress can be helpful, and stress can be harmful. All of us can learn what situations in our lives cause good stress and use them to our advantage. We can learn how to avoid those situations that cause bad stress in our lives. And we can learn **techniques** and strategies to lessen stress when it becomes too much.

Stressors: Demands Made on the Body

Stressors are events, situations, or surroundings that cause us stress. Each of us has particular events that are stressors. We can recognize events that are stressors in our lives by how our bodies respond. Our palms get sweaty. We can feel our hearts beat faster. The muscles in our body grow tense. Some of us feel stress when we take an important exam. Some of us feel stress as we warm up before a game. Almost all of us will feel stress if we feel threatened by someone or by a group. As we wait for our best friend to step off an airplane from a long trip, we may feel stress. Even accepting an award before a large crowd or waiting for our favorite group to come on stage for a concert can cause us stress.

For most of us, pointing to events and situations that cause us stress is easy. But recognizing the **environments**, or surroundings, that cause us stress can be much harder. Our home, for example, can be an environment that causes stress. Disagreements and fights between our parents may cause us **anxiety**, or worry and fear about the future. Constant fighting with brothers or sisters can cause stress. If we feel unloved by our parents, our self-esteem may suffer and we may feel unworthy. Feelings of unworthiness will cause stress.

Even our cities and neighborhoods can cause us daily stress. Living in violent and dangerous cities can cause stress. The constant noise in crowded cities or neighborhoods can make our nerves feel like drums that are constantly being pounded. Even places without much sunshine can be stressful environments.

School can also be a stressor. We may feel pressure if we have difficulty learning. Reading school textbooks without understanding them can **frustrate** us and be a daily stressor.



We may feel pressure if we have difficulty learning.

Our social lives can cause stress. We may feel the need to be popular and push ourselves to go to every party.

Breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend can be one of the most stressful experiences in our social lives.

Most people, at some time, will feel stressed by their work. Bosses can pressure us to work harder and harder. Some bosses may take out their own anger on workers and treat them poorly. Some jobs demand difficult decision-making. A person who fights fires feels stress as he puts his life at risk. A surgeon is

responsible for a patient's health and must always be careful and accurate in her work.

Stressors can be fearful or uncomfortable events or environments. Stressors also can be happy events or comfortable surroundings. A stressor is any situation—happy or sad—that speeds up our bodies and puts them on alert.

The Body's Response to Stress: Readiness and Recovery

Once the body sees a place, a person or people, or an event as a stressor, it begins preparing itself to respond. The body readies itself for what is called a *fight-or-flight response*. The fight-or-flight response prepares us to stay and defend ourselves against danger or to run away from it.

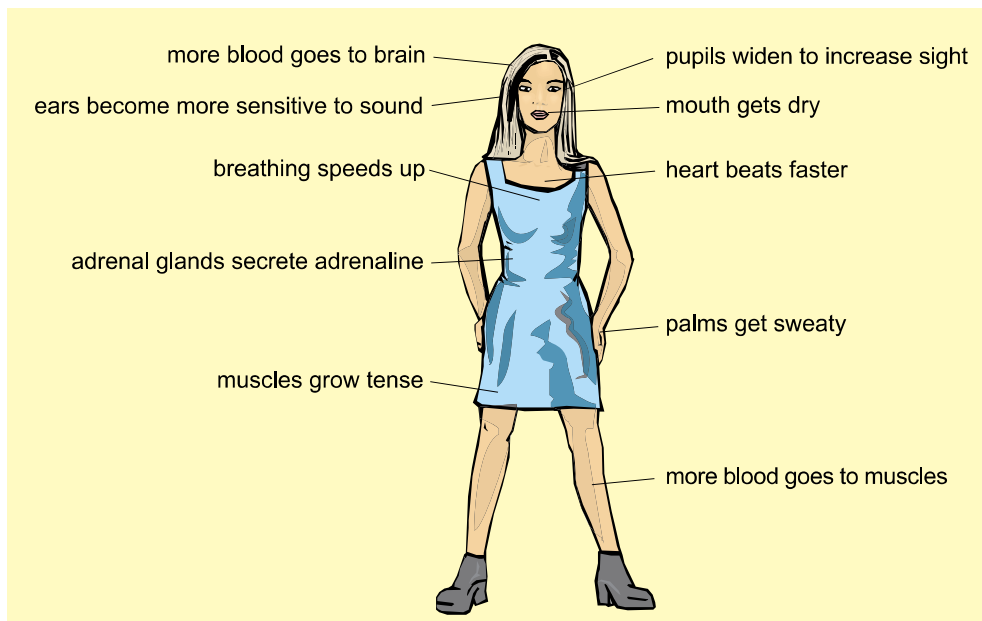
Thousands of years ago, human beings mostly faced *physical* stressors. The caveman found himself facing a charging beast or a raging forest fire. Unlike the caveman, we feel the fight-or-flight response when we face any kind of stress—even one that is not going to eat us, such as a difficult homework assignment or a nerve-wracking interview for a job.

Our bodies go through three stages when facing a stressor: the alarm stage, the resistance stage, and the exhaustion stage.

The Alarm Stage: Getting Ready

You look at the exam the teacher has just handed you. You know that your grade for the class will depend on how you do on this exam. You feel a current of electricity running across your skin. After school, you join your soccer team for the biggest soccer game of the year. You pace back and forth, adjusting your shin guards. You feel as if you are about to jump out of your skin.

You recognize both of these situations as stressors. To prepare you, your body releases a hormone called **adrenaline**. Adrenaline increases your strength and alertness. You feel adrenaline as a rush of energy and excitement. Your body is preparing itself to fight or flee. Of course, you will neither fight nor run from the exam. However, the body still responds to *mental* challenges in the same way as it responds to *physical* challenges or danger.



Physical changes occur when you experience stress.

During the *alarm stage*, you become ready for quick movements and deep concentration. You begin to breathe more rapidly because you need more oxygen to fuel your body's increased rate. Your heart speeds up to send more and more blood to your muscles, brain, and lungs. Your muscles tense as they prepare to be used. Your senses heighten—your pupils widen to sharpen your sight, and your ears become more sensitive to sound.

Sometimes these changes in the body can lead to good results, and sometimes they can lead to bad results. The alarm stage may make you play better football than ever before. You gain increased energy and stamina from your adrenaline. You see the receiver move into position, and you throw the football as if it were attached to a string reaching the receiver. Or the alarm stage may overwhelm you, and you lose your ability to react. You seem to forget how to throw the ball, and you move stiffly and slowly.

You can also have different responses to taking important exams. You may respond to this stressor by becoming more alert. You remember everything you studied and you move through the questions easily. On the other hand, you may go blank. You remember studying, but the information seems blocked and hidden inside your mind.

Signs of Stress	
Emotional and Mental Signs of Stress	Physical Signs of Stress
depression anxiety irritability mood swings nightmares worrying forgetfulness poor concentration loneliness trouble relaxing	pounding heart headaches dry mouth shortness of breath weight change fatigue insomnia diarrhea constipation exhaustion

The Resistance Stage: Returning to Normal

After the alarm stage ends, the *resistance stage* begins. Your body now attempts to return to its normal state. It tries to reduce its heart rate to normal. It works to relax its muscles and remove the tension. It tries to return the eyes and ears to their everyday level of awareness. Your body is trying to relax.

However, if you have trouble relaxing, the body changes you experienced during the alarm stage will remain. You will continue to feel *keyed up*. You may have difficulty eating or sleeping after a big game. It may take you a day, or even longer, to return to your normal state.



The same response can happen after a mental demand, such as an exam or job interview. You may find that within an hour after an exam, your mind is clear and ready to concentrate again. Or you may find your mind filled with thoughts and too cluttered to concentrate.

The Exhaustion Stage: Wearing Down

If your body does not return to a relaxed state, it will continue to be on alert. Although your body may be sitting still, inside it is sprinting and fidgeting. It will begin to wear down and exhaust itself as it uses up its energy at a quick rate.

When Stress Becomes Too Much: The Negative Effects of Stress

We may think we would like *stress-free lives*. But, in fact, we need *some* stress in our lives. Stress is a kind of exercise for our systems. If we never feel stress, we will never be able to face difficult situations and do well. We will never develop our stress “muscles” and be fit against stress.



We may think we would like stress-free lives.

Although mild stress and even high stress can be helpful for a brief time, the body will break down if stressed for too long a time. The body tires and becomes exhausted. The body’s **immune system** begins to fail, and the body loses its ability to fight disease. We become sick and tired, and we lose our ability to do things well. Because too much stress reduces our concentration and alertness, we are more likely to have an accident.

Long periods of stress can cause stomachaches, muscle aches, and headaches. They can cause high blood pressure, heart disease, and even heart attacks. Many doctors and scientists claim that most of our sicknesses are caused by stress. We may be in the hospital because of a heart attack or cancer, but it may have been stress that caused those sicknesses.

Not only do long periods of stress cause physical problems, they also cause **psychological** problems. We may spend our days feeling worried and frightened. We may feel frustrated and sad, and even begin to feel a sense of hopelessness about our futures. Eventually, these feelings can lead to **depression**. *Depression* is a disorder that includes feeling unhappy and hopeless.



Stress can cause you to worry and be frightened.

Living with Stress: Learning to Cope

Too much stress can make us unable to cope with daily life. Fortunately, anyone can learn and use the three steps for avoiding and reducing stress. First, know your body’s early *warning signals* that you are experiencing

stress. Second, become aware of the *stressors* in your life. And third, learn strategies to *avoid and reduce* stress.

Living with Stress



1. Know your body's early warning signals of stress.
2. Become aware of the stressors in your life.
3. Learn strategies to avoid and reduce stress.

The First Step: Know Your Body

Begin to notice how your body responds to stressful situations. Do your hands and feet grow cold? Do you begin to shake and tremble? Does your heart race and pound? Do you have trouble talking and making sense? What about your throat—is it dry? Do you experience light-headedness or dizziness? Do you begin to sweat and blush? Do you lose your appetite, or do you experience indigestion? Most of us experience one or more of these physical warnings when we are feeling stress.

In addition, we may also experience psychological changes. Do you feel like hiding? Do you suddenly feel very alone? Do you lose your ability to concentrate? Do you suddenly feel tired, as if you need to sleep?

Physical and Psychological Changes Caused by Stress



- Do you suddenly feel very alone?
- Do you lose your ability to concentrate?
- Do you suddenly feel tired, as if you need to sleep?
- Do you have a weight change?
- Do you have headaches?
- Do you feel exhausted?
- Do you feel like hiding?

When you experience any of these physical and psychological responses, you know you are responding to a stressor. Stay aware of your body and mind. If you continue to experience any of these responses for more than a week or two, you may need help. See your counselor at school or a doctor or nurse. Talk to a parent or call the local health department. Respond to long periods of stress as you would to any illness—seek help!

The Second Step: Become Aware of Hidden Stressors in Your Life

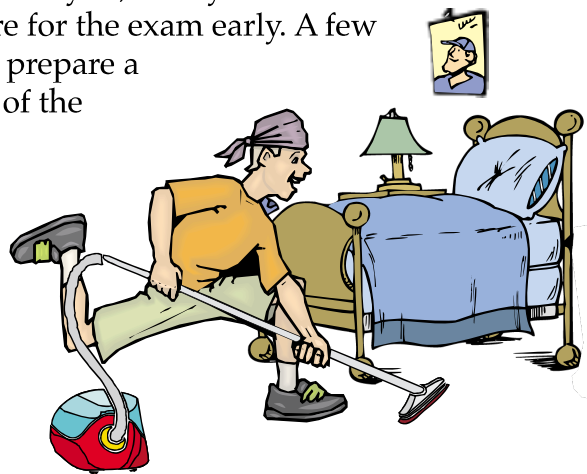
Some of us can stand before a large audience and deliver a speech without a bit of nervousness. Some of us can barely get our lips to move and sound to come out of our throats. Some of us get excited before we play a sport. Some of us play sports but don't care much how we play or whether we win or lose. A key to managing stress in our lives is to know which events, situations, and environments cause us stress.

Some events are bound to cause stress for all of us. The death of a close friend or family member can be a deeply stressful event. Major life events such as moving or going to a new school will cause stress. Situations that ask us to choose between our beliefs and our friends will stress us. For example, if we must choose between doing drugs or losing a friend, we likely will feel *stressed out*.

Sometimes stressors can be very difficult to recognize. Have you ever yelled at a friend or a pet and then wondered why? Have you ever felt angry but been unsure why you were angry? Have you ever felt lonely, hurt, afraid, sad, or worthless and been unsure why you felt this way? All of us have feelings that seem to come from nowhere. But these feelings are caused by stressors in our lives. We need to think about these feelings and look into our lives. We need to discover what is causing them so we can begin to get relief from them.

Once you can pinpoint the stressors in your life, you can take action. If you know that exams are stressors for you, then you can reduce that stress. Begin to prepare for the exam early. A few weeks or a week before the exam, prepare a schedule. Work through a section of the material each night. You will gain confidence by preparing early and entering the exam feeling good about your hard work. Whatever the stressor might be, preparation will reduce stress.

Some stressors can be **anticipated** and removed before they happen. This is called *stress intervention*. Take a constant criticism you might hear from a parent. Each time you hear your



If you feel stress each time you hear your parent criticize your messy room, clean up your room before your parent comes home from work and remove the stressor before it happens.

parent criticize your messy room, you feel stress. Perhaps each time your parent criticizes your lengthy phone conversations, you feel stress. Work to eliminate these criticisms. Clean up your room *before* your parent comes home from work. End your phone conversations *before* your parent complains.

Some stressors can be eliminated by a change in your attitude. You and your little brother pick on each other and eventually fight. These fights always leave you feeling raw and your parents angry. Try to reverse your attitude towards your brother—rather than criticizing him, try *complimenting* him. Or consider a friend with whom you always disagree. The next time you talk, try to see his or her point of view. See what makes sense about his or her comments, rather than why they are wrong.

Once you’ve identified stressors in your life, you can begin to manage them.

The Third Step: Learn Strategies to Avoid and Reduce Stress

Strategies for avoiding and lowering stress can be divided into two types. Some strategies help us *strengthen* our ability to fight and avoid stress. And some strategies help us to *reduce* the stress caused by a specific problem.

Strengthening Our Ability to Fight and Avoid Stress: The Fit and Relaxed Body

Be fit. Exercising regularly is one of the best ways to fight and **regulate** stress. Anytime we experience stress, the body’s muscles—and *particularly the heart muscle*—must work harder. The more fit our muscles are, the better they can work when stressed.

We produce adrenaline when stressed. As long as adrenaline remains in our system, our bodies will continue in a fight-or-flight response. Our muscles tense up and will remain tense until the adrenaline is used. Exercise helps remove unneeded adrenaline from our systems. Our bodies can then return to their normal state.



Exercising regularly is one of the best ways to fight and regulate stress.

When we exercise for 30 minutes three times a week, our bodies release beta-endorphins. *Beta-endorphins* help relieve pain, relax the body, and create a sense of well being. In short, beta-endorphins can help us maintain a positive attitude, and a positive attitude helps us resist and manage stress.

Our diet, or the foods we eat, also has a sharp effect on how well we resist and manage stress. An overweight body, or a body filled with fatty foods, alcohol, and caffeine, stresses the heart and other muscles.

Adequate sleep is also essential for a fit body. During sleep our bodies heal and repair. Without adequate sleep, the body is not ready or able to manage and resist stress.

Assertiveness. When we are not honest with others and hold back our thoughts and needs, we tend to walk around angry and frustrated. We become a sealed bottle filling with steam—we begin to experience stress! So make it a practice to speak honestly with others rather than being silent. Most of us have found ourselves frustrated and angry because we didn't speak up about something when we had the chance. Learning to be **assertive** will keep the body from filling with anger and will keep us from feeling isolated and unconnected to others.

Relaxation. The opposite of stress is relaxation. When we relax, we release tension from our muscles. Our blood pressure lowers. Our bodies begin healing and repairing. Many forms of relaxation include a quiet place where we can sit or lie in a comfortable position. You can learn many different kinds of relaxation techniques from a counselor. The following are two easy and useful techniques.

1. *Meditation* has been an effective relaxation technique for thousands of years. Sit in a comfortable position but don't slouch. Close your eyes and begin breathing through your nose. Keep your attention on your breath as it passes out of the tip of your nose. Begin silently counting each time you exhale. Continue counting until you reach five. Then return to one and begin counting again. Do this for 10 minutes. You may want to work up to a maximum of 20 minutes. Do not judge how well you are able to do this relaxation technique. If you lose your count or if your mind drifts off, just gently begin counting again. This is a relaxation technique, not a contest.



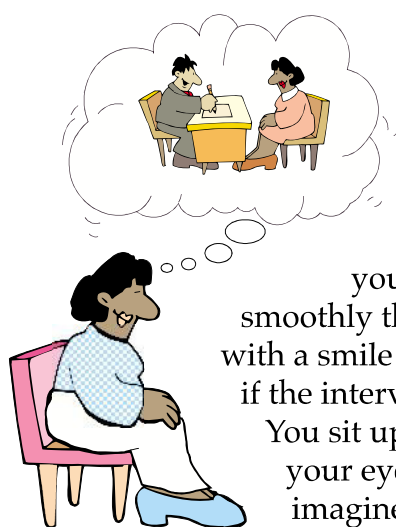
2. *Progressive muscle relaxation* helps you relax your body one muscle at a time. Begin by laying flat on your back. Squeeze tightly all the muscles in your face for five seconds. Then release. Repeat this five-second squeeze and release. Move to your shoulder muscles and squeeze and release, squeeze and release.

Then do your arms, your hands, your buttocks, your upper legs, your lower legs, and finally your feet. Many of us do not realize we go through our day with some muscles in our bodies tensed. This technique helps us identify those muscles and relax them.

Learning Techniques to Reduce Stress: Visualization; Problem-Solving; and Goal-Setting

Once you've identified a situation or problem that is causing you stress, you can begin to take action. Sometimes an upcoming event will cause stress. Sometimes a decision you must make will cause stress. In either case, there are techniques that can help you reduce the stress and make decisions with which you can live.

Visualization. You have an interview next week for a job you really want. Like most of us, this kind of event makes you nervous. You know you are capable of doing this job well—if you can only get through the interview. Each time you think about the interview, however, you imagine yourself stumbling on your words. Your mind goes blank when the interviewer asks why you are the best person for the job. How can you relax and change your image of how this interview will go?



You can begin to see the interview going well through *visualization*, or forming a picture or movie of the interview in your mind. Sit quietly and close your eyes. Imagine yourself walking into the building where you will be interviewed. You are feeling good about yourself—you are nicely dressed and your posture shows confidence. You walk smoothly through the building and introduce yourself with a smile to the receptionist. You use a firm handshake if the interviewer offers you her hand. You smile easily. You sit up straight in the interviewer's office. You keep your eyes on hers and you listen to her questions. You imagine the questions she will ask and you answer

each one with confidence. You are relaxed and being yourself. You go through each step of the interview in your mind and imagine only a positive outcome.

Visualization will work for any situation or event. Whether you are facing a job interview or a big game, an important exam or a first date, close your eyes and imagine yourself succeeding.

Problem-Solving. Let's say, for example, that your friends are pressuring you to do drugs. You are feeling stress because you might lose your friends unless you join them in doing drugs. You could make a decision quickly: "Oh, why not? It won't kill me, and it'll make my friends happy." Or you could take a thoughtful approach: "I need to carefully consider this problem. After all, doing drugs can hurt many people—myself and others!"



To begin problem-solving, break the process into steps. Small steps are easier to manage and can help you see and study the options.

1. Turn the problem into a question. Write it down so you can look at it: "Should I do drugs to make my friend happy? Will doing drugs make me happy?" By forming and writing down the question, you can begin to understand what is at stake. In this example, you learned that the real question is, "Will doing drugs make *me* happy?"
2. Gather information and ideas to help you make a decision. Go to the library, talk to counselors or experts. Talk to people you trust and ask for advice.

Find out what drugs can do *for* you and what drugs can do *to* you. What will they do to my body and mind? What will happen if I break the law? Write down the pros and cons of doing drugs.

3. Write out all the possible choices and their **consequences**. Be honest. For example, you might write: "I could do drugs and keep my friends." But that is an incomplete answer. A more complete answer might read: "I could do drugs and keep my friends, but my body and mind will suffer, and so would my



self-respect.” Another choice would say: “I could decide not to do drugs. I will probably have to find new friends, but there may be no other choice.” Or, you might consider doing drugs occasionally, but you would have to drop this possibility if your research has shown that most people cannot do drugs occasionally. People often let drugs become an everyday part of their lives.

4. Make a decision. Remember that anyone can make a decision.

However, the mature person makes a *responsible* decision.

The mature person understands her values. She is not willing to make a decision that violates values to which she is committed. She is self-confident enough not to give up her values to please someone else. The mature person makes a decision that will not hurt herself or others. She knows that some decisions will not make everyone happy, and she is strong enough to make a responsible decision regardless.



5. Evaluate your decision. Sometimes the right decision will not relieve stress immediately. If you decide not to do drugs, you will experience some stress from your friends' disapproval. But you will know that in the long run, being drug-free is a much less stressful way to live.

Sometimes we make wrong decisions. If we can change them, we should. If we can't change them, we need to be mature enough to take responsibility for them. You may decide you'd rather go out this weekend than paint your neighbor's porch. But you committed yourself to the job—it was a decision you made and therefore need to honor.

Stress-causing problems come in a variety of forms. They can be about friends and your social life. They can be about whether to buy a car or which kind of car to buy. They can be about which vocational school or college to attend. They can be about which part-time job to accept. They can even be about whether to study or go to a party this weekend!

Goal-Setting. We can describe goals as either *short-term goals* or *long-term goals*. Short-term goals include those things we want to accomplish or acquire soon. If we want to raise our grades in school this semester or make the swim team next year, we are striving toward a short-term goal.

However, if we want to be a doctor who helps people in war-torn countries, we are striving for a long-term goal. Setting and working toward goals give us direction. Without goals, we may lose our motivation and find ourselves just drifting through life. But goals can often cause us stress when we don't know how to reach a goal or when a goal seems too far away to ever reach. Fortunately, we can use a strategy to help us set and reach our goals.

1. Make your goals specific and reasonable. All of us want to be *happy*. Many of us want to be *wealthy*. And most of us want to have *loving families*. But these goals are stated in general terms. They need to be broken down so you can develop a plan to reach them. What do you consider a loving family? What would make you happy? Would improving the lives of others make you happy? If so, what, in particular, could you do to improve the lives of others? Let's say that a job in the medical field would fit this goal. You could be a doctor, a nurse, an emergency medical technician (EMT), or a physical therapist, to name just a few.

As you read about the possibilities, look for goals you think you could reach. Becoming a doctor takes many years of schooling. You don't think you are patient enough to spend all that time in school. However, becoming an EMT takes less time. Like a doctor, an EMT gives care in emergency situations that can save lives! Becoming an EMT is a specific and long-range goal you think you can reach.

2. Break your goal into steps. Write down a list of steps you must climb to reach the goal of being an EMT. Your first step is to take a wide range of science courses in high school to prepare yourself. Your second step is to go to a community college that offers training to be an EMT. Your second step will also include becoming very physically fit to handle the physical and mental stress of emergency situations. Your third step is to pass the EMT licensing exam. Your fourth step is to find a job as an EMT.



Becoming an EMT is a specific and long-range goal you think you can reach.

These steps can further be broken down into smaller steps. Look back at the first step: You must take a wide range of science courses. You

know, for example, that to do well in a high school advanced biology class will take discipline. So you develop a schedule for studying the material in this class. On the schedule, each school night represents a step you will accomplish towards your goal. Each night you will spend an hour studying biology. Two weeks before each exam, you add an extra half-hour to your study time in preparation.

You can even break down each study session into steps: 15 minutes reviewing the material learned in previous chapters, 15 minutes reviewing class notes, and 30 minutes studying material to be discussed in the next class.

When we focus on the smaller steps of a large goal, we can reduce stress. We feel good about ourselves as we see the goal coming nearer. And we can take satisfaction each time we complete a step—no matter how small that step is. After studying each night for your biology class, you can check off the step you've completed.

3. Recognize when you won't be able to reach a goal. Sometimes we try to reach a goal but can't reach it. We will feel some disappointment. But not all is lost. Remember, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you tried. Many people never pursue their dreams—they just dream them.

When we can't reach a goal, we can always change our goals. As long as we have goals and work towards them, we will remain challenged and productive.

When Stress Takes Over: Depression

Nearly all of us have had a few days or even a week during which we felt unhappy. We may not have liked ourselves during this period. We may even have lost hope that things would change and we would regain our old selves. We probably described ourselves as having a *case of the blues*, or feeling *in the dumps*, or feeling the *weight of the world*. But for most of us, things did change. We talked with friends, listened to music, exercised, and played sports to get ourselves back on track. We may have taken a vacation or have begun a new hobby to take our minds off our worries. We soon began to have fun again.



Although a particular worry or concern continued to sneak into our thoughts, we could still enjoy life. We had suffered from what is called *short-term depression*.

But sometimes the painful feelings don't go away. Even after a few weeks, we still find ourselves unhappy and living in a bubble of gloom. When we feel stressed by emotional pain and worry for more than two weeks, we may be suffering from *long-term depression*.

The Causes of Long-Term Depression: Traumatic Stressors

Long-term depression can be caused by a stressor, or particular event. The death of a close friend or family member, for example, is a common cause of depression. Failing at something we wanted to achieve can be a stressor that causes depression. The athlete who injures herself and can no longer compete may suffer from depression. The student who wanted to be a doctor but was not accepted at a medical school may fall victim to depression.

Depression can be caused by low self-esteem or a poor self-image. If we feel unloved by our families or rejected by schoolmates, we may suffer from depression.

Depression can also be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Such a chemical imbalance may be a natural condition, or it may be caused by drugs such as alcohol.



About one in five American teenagers will suffer from long-term depression.

About one in five American teenagers will suffer from long-term depression. Fortunately, depression can be cured or controlled. But first we must learn to recognize the common signs of depression.

The Signs of Depression: Drastic Change

When a person becomes depressed, he or she will usually show some signs. These signs are important for us to recognize in others *and in ourselves*.

- eating much less or much more
- suddenly losing interest in school and activities that were once enjoyed
- withdrawing from friends and family
- feeling constantly tired
- losing the ability to think clearly
- suddenly behaving in a different way or like a different person
- suddenly losing interest in appearance
- feeling helpless or worthless
- increasing the use of a chemical substance (such as alcohol)

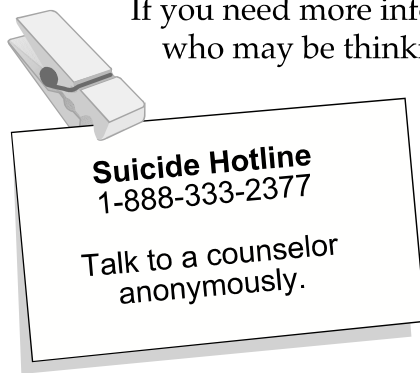
Anyone who recognizes these signs in herself or in someone else needs to get help. Talk to a parent, a school counselor, or a doctor or nurse. It is difficult for a person suffering from depression to cure himself.

Beyond Depression: Suicide

Some persons who suffer from severe depression feel so much emotional stress that they want to die. Each year, about 50,000 teenagers and young adults attempt **suicide**, the intentional taking of one's own life. And each year, about 10 percent or 5,000 teenagers succeed in taking their own life. *Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers.*

Most people who attempt suicide do not really want to die. Their suicide attempt is really a call for help. All of us need to respond to the signals our friends and family may send that they may attempt suicide. These signals include all the ones listed above describing depression. However, a person who may attempt suicide often sends additional signals.

- talking about suicide (three out of four persons who attempt suicide tell someone first)
- talking about getting even with family members or others
- giving away things of value or importance



If you need more information about helping yourself or a friend who may be thinking about suicide, call the Suicide Hotline at 1-888-333-2377. You can talk to a counselor anonymously. This person will talk to you in a nonjudgmental way.

When someone talks to you about committing suicide, or when you recognize any of the signs of suicide or depression, listen and respond. Do not assume the

person is just joking or trying to get attention. Encourage the person to talk about his or her feelings. Talking about our feelings can be a great relief. Listening to someone in emotional pain shows that you really care. Help the person find a counselor or doctor who can help. Also, do not promise to "keep it a secret," go and talk to an adult immediately.

If you believe a person is about to attempt suicide, *do not leave the person alone!* Take the person to an emergency room at a hospital or call 911 for an ambulance. It may turn out that the person was only talking about suicide but would not have attempted it. But if ever you want to be very safe rather than terribly sorry, it is when you believe someone may commit suicide.



If you have a friend who may be thinking about suicide, call the Suicide Hotline at 1-888-333-2377.

Summary

The body experiences *stress* when a situation makes a demand on it. Any situation or event that causes the body stress is called a *stressor*. Each of us has our own particular stressors. One person may feel stress while speaking before a class. Another speaker may feel the opposite of stress—relaxed. Stressors can be physical events, such as a soccer game, or they can be mental events, such as an exam. Stressors can even be the *environments* in which we live, such as our homes or neighborhoods.

When we experience stress, our bodies go on alert. They produce *adrenaline*, a hormone that increases our strength and alertness.

Some stress is healthy, while other stress is unhealthy. When we experience stress for a short time or if it helps us to accomplish a task, it is healthy. When we experience stress for a long time or if it overwhelms us, it is unhealthy. Many doctors and scientists claim that stress is the major cause of sickness. Long-term stress weakens our *immune systems*. And long periods of stress can cause heart disease, cancer, and many other life-threatening illnesses.

We can take steps to resist and fight stress. We can discover the hidden causes of our stress. We can learn to be *assertive* and express our thoughts and feelings. Being assertive will help us avoid or lessen our anger and *frustration*. We can eat a healthy diet and get plenty of exercise to resist and reduce stress. We can learn relaxation *techniques* such as meditation and progressive muscle relaxation. Visualization can help reduce the *anxiety* of upcoming events. Problem-solving can help us solve stressful problems. Techniques for setting and reaching goals can make our lives energetic and productive.

When stress becomes overwhelming, we may experience *depression*. Almost everyone experiences short-term depression, or feeling sad for a few days or even a week. Long-term depression lasts for two weeks or more. During a long-term depression a person feels hopeless and unworthy. Most people with depression show signs of the illness.

Sometimes depression can lead someone to attempt or commit *suicide*. Someone who attempts suicide is really asking for help. Anytime a person talks about suicide, we should take her very seriously. Always contact a parent, counselor, or doctor if you or anyone else shows signs of attempting suicide.