

Dealing with teens and stress



Dear Haven,

I am a parent of two high school students. With school back in session, my teenagers' lives are once again filled with homework, sports, and activities. Not only do they express to me how stressed out they feel, but I have noticed that they appear more tired and moody than they were over the summer. I have always encouraged them to get enough sleep and complete assignments ahead of time, but they don't always listen and continue to complain about stress. Sometimes I can't even pin point what exactly is causing them to feel this way. Do you have any suggestions for parents of stressed-out teens?

Dear Parent,

Everyday, in every community, teens are appearing more stressed out. Although some adults feel that teens have no idea what "real stress" is like, such as paying bills, facing troublesome career issues or making difficult life decisions, teens certainly have their own struggles to contend with. According to some psychologists, the teenage years are more stressful than any other time in a person's life. Adolescents can become overloaded as they struggle with physical changes, negative

social changes, rigorous academics and a demand for excellence in athletic performance. Furthermore, today's teens are impacted by their parent's concerns about employment and financial security. The pressure to do well academically so students can attend some of the best colleges is paired with the fear of not being able to afford to go even if they are accepted.

When inadequately managed, this stress can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, physical illness or poor coping skills such as drug and/or alcohol use. Parents must help their teenagers learn to handle stress! They are not always equipped with the coping skills necessary to address the highly stressful situations in which they find themselves. Parents need to listen to their children and pay attention to any increase in fatigue, headaches, stomachaches, irritability, anger or depression.

It is important for parents to model appropriate stress management skills.

Teens benefit from seeing parents utilize such techniques as following a healthy eating plan, engaging in relaxation exercises, listening to music or participating in a sport for enjoyment. By doing so, adolescents learn that a balanced lifestyle can be achieved even when faced with daily dilemmas.

Parents can offer their child coping skills such as breaking a large task into smaller, more manageable

then attaining that small goal makes a teen feel more accomplished. Parents might also suggest teens practice challenging their negative thoughts about themselves by using alternative neutral or positive thoughts. An example would be to help an adolescent transform a statement such as "my life will never get better" into "I may feel helpless now but my life will probably get better if I work at it and get some help." Everyone has their own way of coping with stress. It is important to remember that something as small as taking deep breaths and thinking positively can go a long way.

If your teen shows signs of being overly stressed, a consultation with a mental health professional or a school social worker may be helpful. There are many more techniques that adolescents can learn to address stress that will enable them to emerge from the challenging teen years into capable and confident young adults. We hope this school year proves to be a positive experience for you and your children.

Haven Youth and Family Services is a nonprofit 24-hour youth and family counseling and crisis intervention agency. All services are free of charge. Haven has been a part of the community for over 30 years and has helped thousands of teens and their families overcome obstacles in their lives. For more information, call (847) 446-5606 or visit the Web site at www.haven-