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Home / Education / High Schools / Managing High School Stress

# Managing High School Stress

Here are some ways to help your teen stay balanced.

By [Andrew Bauld](#) | Nov. 1, 2022, at 5:33 p.m.



Some stress in high school is normal, even healthy, but parents should be aware of red flags from too much stress. (GETTY IMAGES)

Between the demands of school, the pressures of social media and the inherent challenges of growing up, teens are under a tremendous amount of stress. And that's before factoring in the [mental health threats](#) that have worsened during the pandemic.

Shannon Carpenter knows all of this firsthand. The 47-year-old Kansas City dad co-hosts a weekly podcast about fatherhood and has three kids at home, including two teenagers. He says there’s no comparison between what he dealt with as a teen and what this generation has to face.

In addition to modern-day stressors like year-round sports and increasingly competitive college admissions, teens are also hyper-aware of the world around them. There might have been a time when parents could shield their teens from some of those anxieties, he notes, but the internet has made that a thing of the past.

“Today it’s not the same. College costs are rising and teens know that. They know about climate change, and inflation. They are more aware of the bigger world than we ever were,” Carpenter says.

## Rising Anxiety in Teens

High levels of stress, especially related to school, have been an issue for teens for years. In a 2013 NPR [poll](#), 40% of parents said their high schooler was experiencing "a lot of stress" from school, while a [2019 Pew Research Center report](#) identified academics as the leading source of pressure teens face. And the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't helped: A 2021 survey from [NBC News and the nonprofit Challenge Success](#) found that 56% of teens said their stress about school has increased compared to before the pandemic

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Not surprisingly, mental health struggles for teens have also been on the rise. The NBC News/Challenge Success survey found that nearly one-third of high school students report concerns about their mental health as a major source of stress. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in 2021 found that 37% of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic, with 44% reporting they persistently felt sad or hopeless.

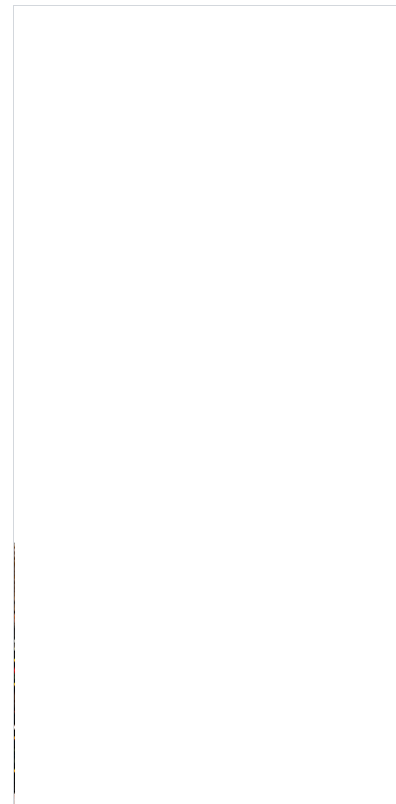
And just because students are back in the classroom doesn't mean those challenges have disappeared.

Since 2014, Traci Small has been the director of school counseling at [Somerville High School](#), just north of Boston. In addition to the usual stressors Small sees in teens, like managing a class schedule and balancing relationships, she’s noticed a troubling new trend since the return of in-person learning.

“One thing we saw last year and this year is a lot more physical altercations at the high school level than we’ve ever seen before. Depression and anxiety are also through the roof,” Small says. “As a staff, we’re trying to figure out if this is normal adolescent changes or if there are other stresses, and not having been in school in particular.”

## When to Be Concerned

Some amount of stress is normal, and even healthy, so it can be hard for parents to know whether the stress they are seeing in their teens is too much. As teens grow older, they are naturally pushing away and sharing less, Small says, so it becomes even more important for parents to be



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aware of [red flags](#), like frequent headaches or stomach aches, excessive hostility or withdrawal from longtime friends.

If you are concerned about your teen, start by reaching out to the school counselor, who can provide support and resources as well as making referrals for more serious situations.

"I think when you see extreme withdrawal, where they don't seem to be enjoying life at all and are withdrawing from families and peers, it's definitely worth reaching out to the school to see if the school is seeing it," Small says.

Parents should also be on the lookout for signs of physical harm. "Be aware of kids potentially handling stress through self-injury or substance abuse or other unhealthy coping mechanisms," Small says.

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## Tips for Helping Your Teen Manage Stress

### Start With the Basics

When it comes to day-to-day strategies for managing teen stress, parents can start with the basics, like encouraging healthy eating and adequate sleep.

Mindfulness and breathing exercises are also popular strategies, but these practices can backfire if they are not done intentionally. "Once you're mindful, you can be just as aware of the negative as the positive," says Gina Biegel, a psychotherapist and founder of Stressed Teens, a program that offers mindfulness-based stress reduction for youth and families in the San Francisco Bay Area. "Teaching young people to be aware of their thoughts and feelings is important, but you also need to teach how to focus attention on the positive and take in the good."

Self-care can start with small, everyday acts, like listening to a favorite song or taking the dog for a walk.

But recognizing the good doesn't mean ignoring the bad. Biegel says problems also arise when teens, and their parents, try to avoid negative feelings.

"Part of that is parents and a culture of numbing feelings and avoiding pain," Biegel says. "Pain is part and parcel of life, and so is stress. If something is affecting you, recognize it. Let your teens be seen and heard."

### Make Time for Small Talks

Helping teens deal with stress also means talking to them about it. But conversations between parents and teens don't have to mimic the "big talk" you might see families on television engage in, with moms and dads delivering a grandiose lecture.

"Laying out everything all at one time doesn't work," Carpenter says. "Teens zone out. You have 10 minutes and then they're gone."

What's worked for Carpenter and his kids are what he calls "microlessons." Throughout the week,

he finds opportunities for 10- to 15-minute conversations to find out what's going on in their world by creating spaces where they feel comfortable talking. For his son, that's playing video games. With his daughter, it's watching a scary movie after school.

The key is asking the right questions and not settling for one-word answers.

"Ask leading questions and really listen to answers," Carpenter says. "For my daughter, I'll ask what happened at school, then about specific classes, then I go further about her friendships, or about something she's seen online. It's a minor interview."

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### **Be Prepared to Be Uncomfortable**

Conversations happen both ways, and experts agree that if parents expect their teens to share what's going on in their lives, they need to do the same.

"You have to show them you're under stress too and be honest about what you're actively doing to lessen that stress," Carpenter says. He's open with them about how he's dealt with failure as well as how he's sought out professional help in the past when things got too big for him to handle.

Ultimately, if parents want teens to practice healthy behaviors, they have to be prepared to model those practices themselves and be vulnerable.

"Don't ask someone to do something you're not willing to do yourself," Biegel says. "Be honest and humble when you sit down with your kids."

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### **Keep Academics in Perspective**

At the end of the day, academics remain one of the biggest stressors for teens, with 61% saying they personally feel a lot of pressure to get good grades, according to the [Pew survey](#). But parents can help lighten this load.

[The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#) lists a number of strategies that parents can work on with their teens, particularly to manage academic stress. These include:

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- Practice and rehearse situations that are causing stress, like if your teen has to give a speech in front of the class.
- Teach practical coping skills, like how to break a big project into smaller, manageable tasks or how to create to-do lists to prioritize work.
- Show your teen that they should be proud of their best effort rather than demanding absolute perfection.

"If you're holding your young person to perfection, that doesn't exist," Biegel says.

And when failures do happen, it's important to remind teens that it's not the end of the world.

"One thing I like to tell people: Be where your feet are. Everyday is an opportunity to start fresh," says Biegel.

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