

TIP SHEET

DEALING WITH HSC STRESS

With more young people attempting to enter university and the fierce competition to get a place escalates, so does the level of stress placed on the shoulders of teenagers increase in their last year of school.

Stress from the anticipation of getting a place at university is not the only stress endured in the final year of school. There is a wide range of other things that can contribute to HSC stress for teenagers as well and some of these may include; lack of sleep, no money, poor grades, inability to meet expectations of parents and teachers, conflict with friends or family, poor time management, feeling overwhelmed; procrastination; lack of motivation; absence of purpose or goal; lack of belief in self, and so forth.

Stress is understood in two ways. Firstly, stress is an environmental demand on us which requires that we make a change (to pass exams, to do as well as possible to get into a course, the transition from school to work, moving house, and death of family member). Secondly, stress is also our response to the environmental demand whether real or imaginary (mental, physical and social/behavioural responses such as optimism, drinking in excess, balance, illness, bitchiness, irritability, etc.). Stress is usually associated with high arousal – I am so stressed! However, we can be stressed from too little arousal. I am so bored! Some researchers argue that people perform at their best anywhere in between the two extremes of too much and too little stress.

When stress is experienced cortisol is released. Cortisol is a hormone released by the adrenal glands which sits over the kidneys but is controlled by the brain. Studies show that high levels of cortisol in the body can kill cells in the hippocampus, the area of the brain that regulates the expression of emotion. Experiments using high tech equipment, such as fMRI's, EEG's and PET Scans show people suffering from conditions related to stress such as depression experience a shrinkage in the hippocampus. Other studies using similar equipment show that people who are "stressed out" or anxious have an easily aroused amygdala, the place in the brain that houses negative emotions. Studies also show a healthy frontal lobe in the brain when people manage stress well. The frontal lobe is located directly behind the forehead and is responsible for higher mental processes, such as planning and logic.

fMRI - tracks changes in blood flow in the brain/how mind works during mental activity/like a video

EEG - tracks electrical impulses in the brain but only just below scalp

PET Scan - tracks activity of neurotransmitters in the brain

So often in life we cannot change the environmental factors of stress, but we can change how we **respond**. Below are some suggestions for managing HSC stress:

1. Learn to relax amidst the stress. Do some exercise, go for a walk to get some space or take a break, learn about slow and deep breathing to calm down, listen to music, have a warm bath, talk to someone you trust, etc.

2. People respond emotionally to too much or too little stress in different ways. Some may get angry, some depressed and some anxious, or stressed out to use the more colloquial term! To deal with the stress effectively, it is important to **deal with the feelings** (e.g., anger, sadness, jealousy) before moving onto what caused the feelings (e.g., a criticism from a friend, a poor mark in a practice test, a negative stare from a parent). Are you feeling angry because dad is at it again, criticizing you for not spending enough time at your desk; guilty because you could be doing more work; jealous that it was so easy for your older brother who was "naturally" academic? Parents/carers should acknowledge these feelings so that you can work through them and move on.

The traffic lights method can help us to manage our feelings more effectively by encouraging us to acknowledge and deal with the feelings first before looking at how to **solve the problem** or complete the task and taking action.

Red light - **Stop** and gather feelings and thoughts (exit, hold tongue, pick your fights, refrain from decision, manage self talk, and withhold behaviour)

Yellow light - **Prepare** the intentions (take the time to think about it, explore the options, focus on positive emotion e.g., tolerance and empathy instead of anger)

Green light - **Go** and take action (commit to your decision and follow through)

3. Manage motivation and be organized. If motivation is a problem and you find yourself procrastinating take an action such as writing a list of things to do, preparing a timetable, etc. Refer to tip sheet on Motivation. Refer to the tip sheet on Study Habits for hints on getting organized.

4. Our stress can get out of control if we dwell, worry or attempt to predict what is going to happen before it does. You don't know until you know. It is important to focus on what you want, the end result, the vision, the goal or the problem solved, not where you are, the hard road ahead, what you don't have or the problem. **Optimism** is an emotional pattern that has been identified as important in coping with stress in a positive way. Optimism is a feeling that things will turn out all right for the future. Those of us who are optimistic are usually self-starters, have a "can do" attitude and live life on a "want to" basis. Optimistic people are happy which is necessary to deal with negative emotional states such as depression. Those of us who are pessimistic usually wait for others to do things, have a "I can't" attitude and live life on a "I have to or else" basis.

Research shows that pessimism is often the result of a person who thinks that they are trapped; that there is no way out; that there is no hope. Seligman, an expert in the field of optimism and pessimism conducted studies on dogs that demonstrates this concept. He used animals for

his experiments because animals and humans are so similar in their emotional makeup. Research conducted by Seligman on optimism shows that optimistic children do better all round – academically, get over problems, happier, career advancement later in life, etc. Optimistic parents also do a better job of parenting – not surprising because they avoid criticising and blaming the child and focus on directing the desired behaviour of the child through effective feedback.

Optimistic Parent

"You did something that inconvenienced me today." "We have spoken about keeping your room clean." "It is your responsibility to keep your room clean." "How do you think we could solve this problem?"

Pessimistic Parent

"I have told you a thousand times." "You always leave stuff around." "You never keep your room clean." "You are a slob." "You should live on the streets not in this house." "I am fed up with you." "Get out of my sight."

Pessimistic Teenager

"I am hopeless at exams. I get so nervous and I always do so poorly. It takes me so long to answer each question."

"I know I won't finish the whole paper. There never is enough time. I am going to get a bad mark. I will probably fail and won't get into uni."

Optimistic Teenager

"I will do well in exams. I have studied hard and I will try my hardest. If I don't get the marks at least I know I have put my best foot forward. If I get the marks I will be so happy. I have many options after school is finished."

5. **Cognitive reframing** or managing self talk is a useful technique that can help us to evaluate people including ourselves, thing or situation in a different way that leads to more positive management of our feelings. This technique is based on the idea that our thoughts influence our feelings. So if we change the way we think, we can change the way we feel.

Here are some examples of unhelpful thinking patterns that you have CONTROL to change to helpful thinking patterns by being aware of your thoughts and managing them.

	Unhelpful	Helpful
Comparing	He is so much smarter. He will breeze through. Why didn't I inherit smart genes like Harry.	I will give it my best.
Catastrophising	I will never get the marks for law. I am such a slow reader.	I will do a speed reading course.
One or the other	I hate Science. I am hopeless at it.	I will try to do my best in Science
Blinkered	I got a B for the last test. I had always gotten an A.	I got a B last time, but normally History is my strong subject. I will do well.
Reading more into something	He gave me a strange look with his eyes. He probably thinks I am stupid and shouldn't be doing the highest maths being a girl and all	I am good at maths.
Generalising	I always fail in languages. I don't have an ear for it	If I practice the language I am sure I will pick it up.

Bullying is a very big concern for some children at schools. Children who are being bullied can be coached on how to manage their self talk so that they do not continue to be bullied. For instance, they may say something like the following to themselves.

"Bullies at school are only people who are scared themselves and they like to project that onto others. I feel confident that I can handle the bully in a mature way and assert myself by saying, Go away in a firm voice. I then let him know what I intend to do if his behaviour continues and that I will get help."

Equally, the bully can learn to manage his or her self talk. For instance, they may say something like the following to themselves.

"I feel good about myself. I am kind to others and in return they include me in their games. When I get angry I breathe slowly and find space for myself."

It is important to point out that although the thoughts and feelings may change, it does not mean that the situation has changed totally. The person still must deal with the practical issues of little support from family, no money and the need to work, no where to study properly, etc.

6. Often the best solutions to problems are the creative ones. There are many opportunities for parents and carers to be creative. Just sleeping on it can help the subconscious go to work and find a more creative solution to a problem.

7. Creativity is also improved when we join our minds together and work as a team. This is **synergy**. The sum total is greater than any individual part. So ask all of those experts on every street corner, read up on the problem, chat to friends, join a parenting support group or ask the relatives – and then you can still make your own decision.

8. On a practical level, **regular exercise** is also an effective way to deal with too much or too little stress as it stimulates the release of neurotransmitters called endorphins (serotonin) which make us happy – it is much easier to parent well when we are happy or optimistic rather than stressed out. Research also shows that physically fit people show less physiological reaction to stressors and are less susceptible to the types of diseases caused by stress, such as ulcers and heart attack as stress hormones such as cortisol are reduced.

9. **Humour** also releases happy hormones. Studies on the effects of humour and the release of happy hormones increases:

T cells that organise the body's immune system,
Gamma interferon, a hormone that turns on the immune system, fights viruses, and regulates cell growth,
Natural killer cells that attack viruses and tumours,
The antibody immunoglobulin A, which fights respiratory infection,
B cells, which produce antibodies against harmful micro-organisms.

10. **Eating low fat high fibre meals** regularly throughout the day (6 small meals) as it increases the metabolism boosting energy levels; **relaxing** regularly through meditation, relaxation activities, breaks, visualisation, socialising, resting, intimacy, etc; and sticking to **regular sleep patterns**, going to bed and waking up at the same time each day as the body likes routine are also helpful practical hints for dealing with stress. Research shows that the practice of **meditation** is very helpful in encouraging positive emotions (e.g., love, compassion, kindness, empathy, patience, peacefulness) and combating destructive emotions (e.g., jealousy, depression, rage, confusion, delusion, anxiety).

Regular exercise, a balanced diet, good sleep patterns, relaxation or quiet time and humour, are also very important practical skills to teach teenagers ways of coping with stress.

Turning to alcohol and non-prescription drugs to alleviate stress only compounds the inability to manage stress. For example, alcohol is a depressant and drinking it in excess can make a depressed person even more depressed. Coffee is a stimulant and drinking it in excess can make an anxious person more anxious.

11. Remember there is more than one way to achieve a goal and with perseverance a goal can become achievable even if at a different time than the HSC.