

Managing stress and anxiety

True or false?

1. All stress is bad
2. There is nothing you can do about stress, it happens, you endure it
3. Nothing bad can happen to from experiencing stress

What signs are there that Alice is stressed out? What could we do to support her?

Alice, 15, is always tired. A pupil at a school in West Sussex, she will take 11 GCSEs this summer. But that's not all she's worried about. Lately she has been wondering if she should join a gym. Bombarded with media pictures of beautiful young women and perfect bodies, she reflects: "You look at people like the Kardashians and Ariana Grande and think 'OK, I'll join a gym'. You feel pressure to look a certain way and that is stressful." She says that homework, especially revision, is the most stressful thing in her life. "I left it all till late and now I have to do it all at once." She adds: "I think, in general, girls get much more stressed than boys – there's pressure for us to look nice, and do really well in our school work, it all gets too much."

Now read this case study of Neela. What are the causes of Neela's anxiety? What helps her?

"I don't know about you, but I have always been a worrier, like my grandmother. Every year, we would plan our family trip to India and it would start ... worrying about the plane journey ... worrying about falling ill, ... and just before take-off I would get those horrible "butterflies", sweaty hands and the feeling that I couldn't breathe. Sometimes I would feel my heart beating and I thought I was dying or going "crazy".

Last year, before my exams, my worrying got really bad. The pressure in secondary school has been high and everyone in my family has always done well and gone on to University, so I knew I had to study extra hard. It got so bad that I couldn't concentrate. I felt shaky and nervous at school and even started to cry most days. I wasn't sleeping well because I was so nervous and was too embarrassed to tell mum and dad.

I ended up pouring my heart out to the school nurse which was the best thing I ever did. She got in touch with my mum, and after seeing the GP, I went to see a team of specialists at the hospital.

Don't worry...I didn't want to be the "girl who sees the shrink" either but it's not like that. The team can have all sorts of people like doctors, nurses, psychologists and social workers. They reassured me and helped me and my family to see that my symptoms were real (just like when you have asthma). I went on to have a talking therapy called CBT. This involves a number of weekly sessions with the therapist. I didn't even need to take medication. Although, I will always be a worrier I feel so much better and I'm even looking forward to this year's India trip."

Managing stress and anxiety

Top ten tips from 'Mind':

1. Talk to your child about anxiety, what is happening in their body and why it happens. Many children and young people don't know what they are feeling when they are anxious, and it can be very frightening and overwhelming. They might even think they are very ill or that they are having a heart attack.
2. Help them to recognise anxious feelings so they can tell when they are becoming anxious and can ask for help.
3. Tell your child it will be okay, and the anxiety will pass. It can be helpful to describe the anxiety as a wave to ride or surf that gets smaller after it peaks.
4. Get your child to breathe deeply and slowly, in through their nose for three counts and out through their mouth for three counts.
5. Give them a cuddle or hold their hand if they will let you - touch can be soothing.
6. It can help to talk to your child about finding a safe place in their mind - somewhere that they feel relaxed and happy. It may be a grandparent's or friend's house or a holiday beside the sea which they can picture when 'wrong thoughts' come into their head or they are feeling anxious. Sometimes holding a memento, like a seashell or pebble, can help.
7. Encourage your child to notice what makes them anxious. Talking it through can help but your child could also try keeping a diary or a 'worry book'.
8. Make a 'worry box'. Your child can write each worry down and post it in the box out of sight. Small children will enjoy decorating the box too. They can leave the worries in there for, say, a week to see if they were worth worrying about (if not they can be torn up). Alternatively, you could designate a specific 'worry time' for around 10 or 20 minutes, (but not too close to bedtime, or when the child is in bed), so worries can be saved up for that time. This gives the message that we are in control of their worries and not vice versa.
9. Work on positive-thinking. Name their worst case scenarios and think through together how to sort out the situation if it happens, e.g. 'I'm worried that we'll miss the bus.' 'What do you think we could do if that happens?' 'We could get the next bus'.
10. Help them maintain a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise to reduce the levels of stress hormones, good sleeping habits, calm bedtime routines, limited screen or computer time in the evening, and a healthy diet.