



HOW TO MANAGE STRESS CAUSED BY EXAMS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

If your child is a seasoned worrier, you will know how difficult living on high alert can be. Constantly irritated, often anxious, and occasionally withdrawn, worriers are in a never-ending state of fight, flight or even freeze.

An upcoming exam or a nerve-racking event can trigger a flight-or-flight response, flooding the body with cortisol and adrenaline. This response, designed to power up the body to face real threats, helped keep our hunter-gatherer ancestors safe. Unfortunately, the part of the brain responsible for keeping us alert can't tell the difference between a woolly mammoth and an upcoming exam. Both are seen as threats, so the body responds the same. Fortunately, we have an inbuilt relaxation response that can help counteract this stress. Here are some ways your child can regulate stress and anxiety rather than live in a constant state of high alert.

Practise belly breathing

Taking several deep belly breaths is probably the quickest way to engage the body's relaxation response. Teach your child or young person to breathe in through the nose to the count of five and out through the mouth to the count of seven. Encourage them to repeat this simple exercise a number of times to switch on the relaxation response. Anchoring belly breathing to regular events such as the start of breakfast or family mealtimes can embed deep breathing into daily life. Make this a part of your child's regular routine to develop a wonderful stress beating habit.

Lift their gaze to the horizon

Next time your child is stressed out suggest that they go out the front of where you live and look down the end of the street. Long distance viewing sends a message to the nervous system that they are safe, signalling to the relaxation response to take over. If a child or young person is stuck at a desk, they can lift their gaze to the horizon and move their head from side to side to achieve a similar effect. It's worth remembering that many positive wellbeing habits are physical in nature, a throwback to the times when people spent most of their time in natural environments.

Splash in some cold water

Hardy types who've added ocean swimming to their daily routines know just how invigorating cold water can be. Your child doesn't have to become an iceberg to experience the stress beating benefits that cold water can bring. Plunging their face in cold water for 10 seconds, turning on the cold water at the end of the shower or holding an icepack to the right side of the neck can achieve the same effect. Their body will be flooded with feel-good endorphins taking their worries away. Cold water use has the advantage of stimulating the vagus nerve, making it easier and simpler for kids to move to relaxation mode in the long term.

Contact family or a friend

A warm chat with a friend, a fun family board game or karaoke dance party will move your child into relaxation mode, away from high alert. While extroverts will naturally connect with others, introverts and shyer types may need some parental encouragement to engage with others.

Do something they love

Ensure your child or young person does something fun and enjoyable every day. Play, hobbies, games – anything that's not screen-based that your child or young person enjoys brings down cortisol levels.

In closing

Regulating stress and anxiety in the body gets stronger and more responsive with practice. Knowing how to support the parasympathetic nervous system is a wonderful strategy to place in a child's or young person's wellbeing toolkit.

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