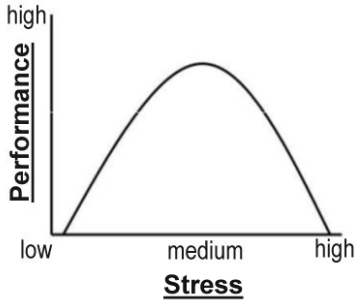
Managing Stress and Anxiety
A Guide for Parents and Guardians

Introduction

Covid-19 has caused disruption to our lives. Many children/young people have coped well but, some may find the change in routine and going back to school stressful. Young people will not all respond to this change in the same way, each young person will have their own way of coping. During this time it is very important that they pay attention to and take steps to promote their wellbeing. Staying active, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, limiting their use of technology will help. However if they become more stressed and anxious the following information may be helpful.

What is Stress and Anxiety?



Stress is a temporary response to feeling under pressure. A small amount of stress can be positive as it can help us to cope with tense or challenging situations. It can also make us more alert and help us to perform better.
Stress occurs when we have to adjust to change, it is part of life. The change can be big or small, bad, or good such as being late for a bus, going on a first date, starting a new school year. Stress can become a problem when we are feeling worried or anxious a lot of the time. Anxiety can be a normal emotional response to many stressful situations. Anxiety is a response to a vague or unclear sense of danger such as 'something bad about to happen' or 'I don't know what to expect and am sure I won't be able to cope'. It can be hard to pin point what is making us feel anxious. Learning to manage stress and anxiety is good for our wellbeing.

What can stress and anxiety feel like?

Stress and anxiety can make you feel overwhelmed, irritable and wound up, afraid and lacking in confidence. They can make your heart beat or breathing get faster, your palms sweaty, or knees get shaky. These physical signs can cause racing thoughts and worry and lead to further anxiety. They can cause young people to have difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

How to help your child/young adult manage?

Remember, feeling anxious at this time is normal but there are things they can do to help themselves:

- sleeping well

- eating well
- getting exercise
- avoiding stimulants

These are some strategies that young people may find helpful if they are feeling stressed:

- **Talking** to friends and family about how they are feeling.
- **Get good quality sleep**. 8 to 12 hours sleep is recommended for students. Leaving their phone/laptop outside the bedroom helps; avoid caffeine and sugar before sleeping. See a useful link on sleep here.
- **Have a healthy diet**. What we eat or drink can affect how we feel. Avoiding or cutting down on caffeine and energy drinks is recommended as they can make us feel more anxious. Also, it is better to avoid foods containing a lot of sugar as this can lead to a sugar crash. Better to eat at least 5 pieces of fruit and vegetables a day and have a balanced diet.
- **Keep active**. Exercising helps to release tension. It can really help young people trying to get a break from their thoughts and wanting to be calm so they can deal with their problems. It will also help them sleep better.
- **Plan their days and their time**. Having a routine is really important in getting through difficult times in our lives. Structuring their days helps young people to feel secure. The plan should include activities such as eating and sleeping, physical activities, household activities, social activities and enjoyable activities, as well as school work/study.

Things they can do:

Remember there is no single technique to manage stress and anxiety but there are a number of things that can be done to help:

1. Identify the Triggers

Young people suffering frequent or excessive anxiety should try to identify firstly the triggers for it and then what helps with the feelings. They might keep a log of the following:

- *When and where do I feel anxious?*
- *What makes the feelings worse?*
- *What helps reduce the feelings?*

2. Positive Self-Talk

As we go about our day, we say things to ourselves in our heads about the things that we or others do. This is called self-talk. If we are experiencing anxiety it is likely that we are engaging in negative self-talk. When anxious we may engage in faulty and irrational thinking affecting the way we feel and behave.

Encourage your students to try and use positive self-talk, such as:

- I can try my best effort instead of giving up
- I don't have to be perfect. My best will be good enough.
- I have managed before, I know I can do it again

3. Relaxation Techniques

There are lots of relaxation techniques and different things work for different people. Practicing relaxation creates the opposite effects to stress and anxiety. It lowers the heart rate, reduces blood pressure and sweat gland activity. By trying some different techniques young people can find what works for them. Suggest to them that they download a Mindfulness and/or Relaxation App. See below for a list of suggestions and further ideas on relaxation can be found here & here & here.

- **Yoga**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Deep Breathing**
- **Body Focus**
- **Meditation**
- **Muscular Relaxation**
- **Visualisation**

4. Distraction

It may help them to take their mind off things if they can distract themselves by:

- Focussing on what is going on around them – for example if they are out walking and feeling anxious, count how many blue cars or people wearing red they see etc.
- Keeping active - Going for walks, doing exercises at home, cycling.
- Finding ways to engage their mind e.g. spell words, counting backwards, saying the words of a song, reading a book or trying a puzzle.

5. Take Control of Worries

Young people should remind themselves that although worrying is normal, it doesn't help. Instead of spending their time worrying, take 10 minutes to write down everything they are worried about. There are worries will seem less scary when written down and they won't have to think about them for a while. If they start

worrying again, they check if the worry is already written down. If it is not, they can jot it down. Alternatively, if a worry comes into their mind, they can choose not to fight it but rather:

- Notice it,
- Name it "*I am worrying about _____*"
- Let it go.

By doing this they are refusing to give power to their worries but this takes practice.

6. Problem-Solving

This can help to reduce worries and anxiety:

1. Write or talk about what the problem is.
2. Think of all the possible solutions to the problem.
3. Look at the pros and cons of each solution.
4. Pick the solution that is best and try it.
5. After implementing it, ask 'Did it work'?
6. If it did not, move on to the next solution.

See template below.

7. Where To Get Support

If anxiety is impacting on their day-to-day life, they may need short term extra support such as the following:

- The HSE have an online programme that gives lots of useful information and strategies to deal with stress.
- There are also useful resources on the Spunout or Jigsaw websites.
- See here and here for more information on mental health supports.
- Talk to your GP who can support them or refer them on for further help and support.

Problem-Solving Plan

1. **What is the problem?**

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2. **What could I do?**

Think of lots of possible different ideas.

3. **What might happen for each of these ideas?**

or

4. **Tick the best solution…**

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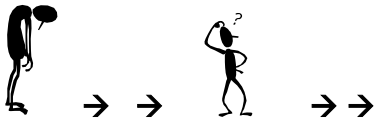
5. **Do it! Put your plan into action!**

6. **Did it work? Think about what went well and what you could do differently next time**

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