

Equipping Adolescents with Coping Strategies



Life is stressful. We need to prepare our children to handle stress in healthy ways. Individuals who deal effectively with stress are better prepared to overcome life's challenges. The best way to protect our children from unsafe behaviors is to equip them with a wide range of positive coping strategies and stress-reduction skills.

It's important to remember, that at this stage of brain development, adolescents are being led by their emotions. They are not "being emotional" — the emotional part of their brain is *actually* in control. The logical part of the adolescent brain is still developing and may not yet be mature enough to process stress in the same rational way their parents would handle that same stressful situation. This means our adolescent children sometimes need us to guide them through situations they find stressful.

Part of being able to respond effectively is being able to identify the cause and significance of a demanding situation. Since emotions are most likely driving an adolescent's view of a stressful situation, he/she may have difficulty making the distinction between a real crisis and a bump in the road. This is a time when our children may need us to guide them through the process of accurately evaluating the situation they are facing.

As with so many other skills, our children learn how to cope by watching how we manage our stress. What coping strategies are we modeling? What is the first thing we do after we say, "Wow, I had a rough day today?"

Here are a few tips to help you model positive, effective coping strategies.

- **Nutrition & exercise:** Our bodies release hormones when we are stressed. When those hormones build up, we can become anxious and overwhelmed. We might feel like the best way to de-stress after a demanding day is to curl up on the couch and snack on some comfort food, but the truth is that processing those hormones with a healthy diet and some form of exercise will help us to feel more in control.
- **Adequate sleep:** As we work hard to accomplish so many tasks, we often sacrifice sleep. Tired people don't manage stress well. Our bodies need rest in order to function optimally. Medical experts recommend adults consistently get 7-9 hours of sleep each night and adolescents get 8-10 hours.
- **Listen:** Sometimes, the best way to process a situation is to talk it through...without judgment or advice. We don't always need someone to solve our problems for us. It can be helpful to just have another person listen.
- **Let it go:** No one can do it all. We need to let our children know that sometimes the best way to deal with stress is to limit the number of activities that fill our calendars.
- **Seeking help:** Sometimes we need help to deal with a demanding situation. Our children need to know that it's ok to ask for help when we are facing a situation that is beyond our ability to handle on our own.

Prevention Principle
Developing healthy coping strategies protects individuals from making unhealthy choices

Conversations That Count

Life's challenges affect all members of a family. The level of impact that stress has on the family is based on the resources they have to deal with the event.

Use this month's [PowerTalk, Our Family Copes Strong](#), to discover ways to build your family's ability to cope with the demands of life.

Tech Tips for Parents: Overwhelmed

Our kids are plugged in...All. The. Time. It seems like they are never more than a moment away from their next virtual connection. That can be very exciting, but it can become quite overwhelming which can lead to stress. Technology can also inhibit the development of effective coping strategies. Since we know that adolescents often respond to the world with the emotional part of their brains (because of their stage of brain development), they may need us to help them define logical boundaries that will help them limit stress and optimize their ability to cope. Some places that we can help our adolescent limit technology:

- ⇒ **Meal time.** Family meals are an important time to connect and discuss the events of the day. We know that being able to talk about our day is an effective way to process stress. When we are distracted by technology, we miss the opportunity.
- ⇒ **Before sleep.** Research shows that screen time in the hour before sleep can disrupt sleep patterns.
- ⇒ **Overnight.** Individuals who keep technology in the room where they sleep are less likely to experience uninterrupted sleep limiting their ability to cope.
- ⇒ **In the car.** Car time is another great opportunity to talk and connect. When our kids are texting or using social media in the car, we miss that opportunity. Also, when we establish the car as a tech-free zone, we are preparing to be safe drivers in the future.

Setting boundaries may be difficult at first, but as with any new skill, it will become easier with practice. Helping our children to set boundaries around technology can prevent them from becoming overwhelmed by that technology.

