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**DAP**  
DRUG AWARENESS PROGRAM

# STRESS & Drug Abuse: THE CONNECTION

Everyone experiences stress at times but because we all react to stress differently and there are different types of stress, it's important to understand its effects, be able to identify what causes it and learn how to manage it.

What stresses you out might not even bother your best friend and vice versa. But internally, your bodies react the same to stressors. That's because the stress response, known as "fight-or-flight", is your body's way of dealing with tough or demanding situations. It's a chemical reaction that prepares your body for a physical reaction because it thinks it's under attack. It causes hormonal, respiratory, cardiovascular and nervous system changes; your heart beats faster, you begin to breathe more rapidly, sweat, tense up and even get a burst of energy.

And while they're not outwardly visible, the nervous system changes that the body experiences can be the most damaging. When stressed, the brain releases a hormone called cortisol. Overtime and under constant stress, parts of the brain that are related to memory and learning are being negatively impacted by this hormone—the same areas effected by early drug use. Because your brain is still growing and developing, up until the age of 25, the damage to the brain caused by stress can end up making you more vulnerable to drug addiction.

So, when stressors are always present, the fight-or-flight reactions in your body are always on. As the brain becomes more impaired, the likelihood of turning to substance abuse as a way to cope with the tension, anxiety and/or depression that comes with these stressful situations is increased immensely.

## What Are the Different Types of Stress?

- **EVERYDAY STRESS** is normal pressures we often experience such as being overwhelmed with too much homework, doing poorly on a test or getting into a fight with a friend. But not all situations that cause stress are negative. For example, preparing for your class presentation or finding the courage to talk to someone you have a crush on can also cause stress. The more practice we get at working through these stressors, the more likely we are to feel less stressed in new, sometimes tougher, situations.
- **DIFFICULT LIFE SITUATIONS** cause stress that is more intense. Things like your parents' divorcing, a painful break-up or the death of someone close—these events can create stress that takes more time to resolve because they're more challenging and don't happen as often. Because of this, we aren't as prepared to work through our emotions but the coping skills that we've built from handling everyday stress is a helpful starting point. Try talking about what you're going through with someone you trust and are close with. It can help to understand how they might have handled this type of stress. Plus, you'll feel better knowing you have their support or guidance to help you work through, cope with or adapt to your specific situation.
- **SERIOUS STRESS** is not at all routine. It can overwhelm your ability to rationalize and cope. It often comes from dealing with a personal crisis like being bullied or abused by a family member; a health crisis such as being badly injured or feeling worried about the many uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 like loss, worry, frustration, anxiety, isolation or depression; or a mental health condition that feels out of control. Most often, the stress is just too strong and even our best coping skills aren't able to help us. Sometimes people react to this stress in ways that are self-destructive like abusing drugs and alcohol. When stress starts to interfere with the ability to enjoy everyday life, it's serious and it's important to recognize that you need some extra help and support.



## Tips to Help Manage Stress

Stressful events will happen. You may not be able to change your current situation but you can take steps to manage how these events effect you. Learning to identify what stresses you and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally during that time can help you feel less overwhelmed and more in control.

- Manage everyday stress by breaking the big problems down into smaller, more manageable tasks. Conquering small things one step at a time, will make you feel better and more accomplished plus help you build your coping mechanisms for future situations.
- Getting regular exercise, spending time with family and friends or volunteering in your community are great ways to redirect negative energy into something positive. Watching tv, playing video games or being online seems relaxing but can increase your stress in the long run.
- Activities that build good health and happiness can help put a positive light on even the biggest challenges. Relaxation techniques like yoga or deep breathing can help settle anxious thoughts as well as finding things to be grateful for or making time for a favorite hobby like reading a book or listening to music. Make sure you're eating healthy, getting plenty of sleep, avoiding excessive caffeine and staying away from tobacco, alcohol or illegal substances as a way to suppress your stress.
- Don't ignore a big problem, hoping it will go away. Remember, it's okay to ask for help no matter what the reason is. When stress builds so much that it becomes unmanageable, it's not always possible to see a way out or know what to do. In these cases, it's time to talk to a parent, counselor, therapist, religious leader, teacher, coach or anyone else you trust and ask for help. Together, you can identify the source of your stress and gain some new coping skills or come up with a plan to get additional help.

## Resources

**Crisis Text Line, [www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org).** *How It Works:* Text "HOME" to 741741. They provide free, 24/7 support via text message and help with things like anxiety, depression, suicide, school and even COVID-19.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).** *How It Works:* Call 800.273.TALK (8255). The Lifeline is free, confidential support, available 24/7 where you can speak to someone and get support during a tough time or if you are in crisis.

**Teenline, [www.teenlineonline.org](http://www.teenlineonline.org).** *How It Works:* Text "TEEN" to 839863 or download the free "Teen Talk" app. If you have a problem or need help working something out, this trained group of volunteers are other teens who can understand what you're going through. They are available every night from 6 to 9 pm Pacific Standard Time.

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