

# Stress & Anxiety



School  
Mental Health  
Ontario

Santé mentale  
en milieu scolaire  
Ontario



Well-being  
St. Clair Catholic District School Board



## Facts

- Anxiety refers to fearful, apprehensive thoughts and feelings about what might happen.
- Anxiety becomes problematic when worries and fears persist over time, are disproportionate to the situation (trigger or stressor) or are not age-appropriate and/or interfere with functioning in one or more areas of life (e.g., school, work, relationships, mood).
- There are effective treatment approaches for anxiety problems and disorders. There are also a number of healthy coping strategies that, when practiced regularly, may help lessen anxiety and improve mental health. Coping strategies are most effective when work, home and learning environments are supportive and allow for accommodations when and if needed.

### Positive effect of stress:

- Stress can be a positive force when our reactions to it are moderate and of short duration. This type of stress is part of life and in fact, it allows us, in moderate doses, to improve our performance in the short term. Examples may include a job interview, presenting in front of a large audience, throwing a party, etc. By learning to adjust to these situations and by paying attention to our thought process we can successfully manage ourselves in these situations, thus learning to be more resilient to everyday stressors.

### Tolerable effect of stress:

- Other times, stressors may cause a more serious but still tolerable stress response. These situations can have the potential of impacting the structure of the brain and our neuronal pathways of stress reactions, but the stressors are of short duration. Consequently, the brain can recover from this stress and undo the negative effect of the stress. Examples of these stressful situations may include a car accident, the news about the illness of a loved one, a difficult conversation with a colleague, etc.

### Toxic effect of stress:

- If the stressors that we are facing are more dangerous and when their duration is chronic, then stress may become toxic. This would include situations where we feel we have little control over the stressors that impact us. In fact, when our stress response is frequently fired up and stays fired up, such as in situations of chronic stress, the resulting toxic stress can negatively impact our brain chemistry, and affect our brain anatomy, especially in developing brains. More specifically, the impact can be the increasing or decreasing of our hypervigilance, which makes us either more or less reactive to normal stressors of life. Situations that may fall in this category include but are not limited to abuse, traumatic life events, etc. To summarize, over time, exposure to toxic stress can lead to an unhealthy hypervigilance to less harmful stressors in our environment, which in turn can lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms.

## Tips

There are different ways kids react to stress & anxiety, sometimes by acting out (for example, being aggressive) and sometimes by being withdrawn (for example, avoiding friends or activities they used to enjoy). It is important for you and others in the family to respond in a sensitive way.

Stress & Anxiety management strategies include:

1. Learning about anxiety and the body's stress response system (fight, flight, freeze) as we need to "name it before we can tame it".
2. Practicing and prioritizing self-care and healthy routines (e.g., eating well, getting sufficient sleep, exercising, taking work breaks, practicing relaxation, noticing and celebrating accomplishments, fostering positive thinking)
3. Maintaining a good support network (e.g., friends, family, treatment support when needed, church group etc.)

Here are some coping techniques that you can use when feeling stress or anxious:

- Talk to a someone
- Talk to your worry
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Exercise
- Colour or draw
- Listen to music
- Calm Breathing
- Do school work
- Write poetry or in a journal

## Resources

- <https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=18&language=English&hub=mentalhealth>
- <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>
- <http://www.psychologyfoundation.org>
- <https://anxietycanada.com/>
- <https://cmha.ca/whats-your-stress-index>

## Sources

- School Mental Health-Assist
- About Kids Health
- Anxiety Canada
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Children and Parent Resource Institute