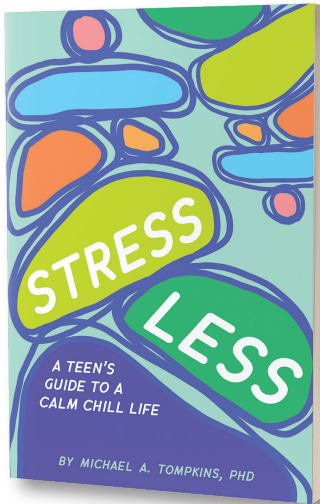




The Pluses and Minuses of Teen Stress



This informative excerpt from the acclaimed book *Stress Less: A Teen's Guide to a Calm Chill Life* defines stress, explores positive and negative stress, and positive and negative coping strategies. **You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#), and by entering code MPKIDS20 at checkout.**

Teens are more stressed than ever these days. That's because the world they're growing up in is far more complex, challenging, and fast-paced than the world their parents grew up in. Maybe you're stressed about a big test that's coming up, but you have to find time to work on college applications and finish two or three hours of homework per night too. Maybe you're stressed by a difficult conversation with your best friend, or with your parents who expect you to act like an adult but sometimes treat you like a kid. Maybe you're stressed that your social media posts aren't getting many likes or that you're not invited to a party that your friends are going to. Or maybe you're stressed about the "big" questions that parents, teachers, and even friends ask you: "Are you going to college?" "What's next for you?" "Are you happy?" Or the "big" questions you ask yourself: "Who am I?" "What's really important to me?" "Will I find a good job?"

What Is Stress?

Stress is your body's reaction to life's challenges. Of course, the ultimate life challenge is to survive a threat to life or limb, such as jumping out of the way of a charging rhino. This is the "fight, flight, or freeze" response, and is the stress response at its best. In an instant, you'll either fight back to defend yourself, run away if you can, or if you can't run away, you'll freeze. Fortunately, most teens don't face charging rhinos, but they do face daily hassles: tests, homework, arguments with friends, and conflicts with parents and teachers, to name a few. Daily hassles contribute the most to chronic stress. This is the stress that builds over the days and weeks and, if you don't do something to decrease it from time to time, causes all sorts of problems for you.

Of course, there's the stress of major life events too, such as moving to a new school, the death of a much-loved pet, facing a serious illness, or a parent who loses a job. Although these major life events are stressful, they don't tend to contribute to the chronic stress that you want skills to cope with. That's because major life events like these don't come along too often, but life's hassles do.

The Positive and Negative of Stress

Not all stress is bad. In fact, life without stress would be pretty boring, unrewarding, and uninspiring. That's because most stress is the positive kind of stress. It motivates us to take on new challenges and to learn new things about ourselves and the world. For example, the excitement you feel on a first date. That's good stress because that kind of stress will help you make a great impression. The exhilaration you feel riding a roller coaster or trying new jumps in the skateboard rink. That's good stress, too. Good stress makes life exciting, fun, and helps us do our best.

The negative kind of stress, on the other hand, tends to overwhelm us and decrease our motivation and self-confidence. That's because negative stress tends to be chronic stress. Not only is it too high, but it stays high too long. Negative stress creates all kinds of problems. For example, sometimes stress is all over your face; acne can be a sign that you're under a lot of stress. Of course, other things can affect acne—hormones, excess oil production, and how much you touch your face—but stress doesn't help. And if you get stressed about your acne, then you're trapped in a vicious cycle: stress, acne, stress, acne.

Also, negative stress can make it difficult for you to get the sleep you need. You're up late trying to finish your work and then you lie in bed for hours unable to settle down and sleep when you're ready. Then, because you're tired the next day, everything is more difficult: studying, concentrating in class, tolerating your little sister, or performing well in soccer practice.

After a while, chronic stress and too little sleep get to you. You become more irritable. Little things set you off and you argue with friends. Soon, your friends don't want to hang out with you as much. Then life gets really hard, because your friends not only make life fun but they help you get through stressful days and weeks—when they're not around, it's even tougher to cope! Here are a just a few more problems negative stress can cause:

- Sadness, nervousness, worry, and panic
- Headaches, stomachaches, and frequent colds and infections
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, and disturbing dreams
- Fatigue, tiredness, and loss of motivation
- Difficulty focusing, concentrating, and making decisions
- Trouble learning, remembering, and memorizing new information
- Increased or decreased appetite, weight gain or loss
- Anger, irritability, and low tolerance for frustration

Positive and Negative Coping

Coping is using the skills you have to solve or tolerate life's challenges and not feel too distressed, anxious, or upset as you do it. Coping doesn't mean that you face life's challenges without feeling something. Sometimes people think that if they're feeling anxious or stressed, then they're not coping. That's not true. In fact, it's difficult to imagine not feeling stressed by a problem or challenge, and as you just learned, some stress helps you focus, think, and act in helpful ways. The goal of coping is to lessen the stress you feel while you solve the challenges you face.

When you're feeling stressed, particularly the kind of stress that goes on and on, day after day, it's natural that you want to do something to lessen it. Some of the ways to lessen stress are positive and healthy, like the skills in this book. Other ways to cope with stress are less healthy because they can negatively affect you and your life. Also, negative coping is typically a quick fix to stress. Like most quick fixes, it only lasts for an hour or perhaps half a day, but soon you're back to the same level of stress or even more. There's more stress because you now have to deal with the bigtime consequences that negative coping can create: unhappy parents, bad grades, or damaged friendships. Although the quick fix of negative coping works in the short term, it tends to harm you, your future, and the friends and family who care about you.

There are lots of negative coping strategies, but here are the ones many teens use:

- Eating too much or too little
- Exploding in anger
- Stepping back from life
- Using screens too much

- Using drugs and alcohol
- Hurting yourself (This is when stress gets dangerous. Some people deal with stress by cutting or hurting themselves in some way. Hurting or thinking about hurting yourself is a sign that you're stressed beyond your ability to cope. If you're thinking of suicide or of hurting yourself in any way, immediately speak to your parents, your doctor, a mental health professional, or call the National Suicide Prevention Life Line at 1-800-273-8255.)

If you cope with stress in negative ways, it's not your fault. People often cope in negative ways because they haven't learned positive ways. That's how this book can help. It's filled with positive coping skills to help you.

Now that you know what stress and coping really are, it's time to take a deeper look at what causes stress and how the skills in this book can help you cope with it.

About the Author

Michael A. Tompkins, PhD, ABPP, is a licensed psychologist and board certified in behavioral and cognitive psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology.

He is the codirector and cofounder of the San Francisco Bay Area Center for Cognitive Therapy, assistant clinical professor at the University of California at Berkeley, and an adjunct faculty member for the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy.

He is the author or coauthor of 12 books, including *Zero to Sixty: A Teen's Guide to Manage Frustration, Anger, and Everyday Irritations* (2020) and *My Anxious Mind: A Teen's Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic* (with Katherine Martinez) (2010), which is a Magination Press bestseller and included in the Reading Well for Young People initiative sponsored by the Wellcome Trust, London, United Kingdom.

Dr. Tompkins serves on the advisory board of Magination Press. He lives in Oakland, California. Visit him at [San Francisco Bay Area Center for Cognitive Therapy](#) and on [Twitter](#).

Stress Less: A Teen's Guide to a Calm Chill Life

Stress Less teaches concrete skills for managing stress and anxiety, organized into common "stress domains" such as family, friends, dating, school, and media.

Let's get real. Stress is part of every teen's life—stress of exams, college applications, a big game, difficult teachers, difficult friends, parents who don't always get you, not to mention the dating and social scenes. Stress like this tends to build over time—week after week—and takes a toll on your mental health. But great news! Learning stress-busting skills doesn't take much time at all. Just 20 minutes a day is probably all it takes.

The skills in this book are easy to learn and can be practiced anywhere—on the bus, before bed, or during lunch. Once you see that it helps, you'll adjust and be ready bust more stress. And then before you realize it—you've got it!

Written by cognitive-behavioral therapist and stress-busting expert, Michael A. Tompkins, PhD, *Stress Less* teaches concrete skills for managing stress and anxiety, organized into "stress domains" such as family, friends, dating, school, and tech/media. And because stress doesn't go away when teens hit adulthood, *Stress Less* will help readers maintain balance and calm as they deal with the ups and downs of life in the months and years to come.