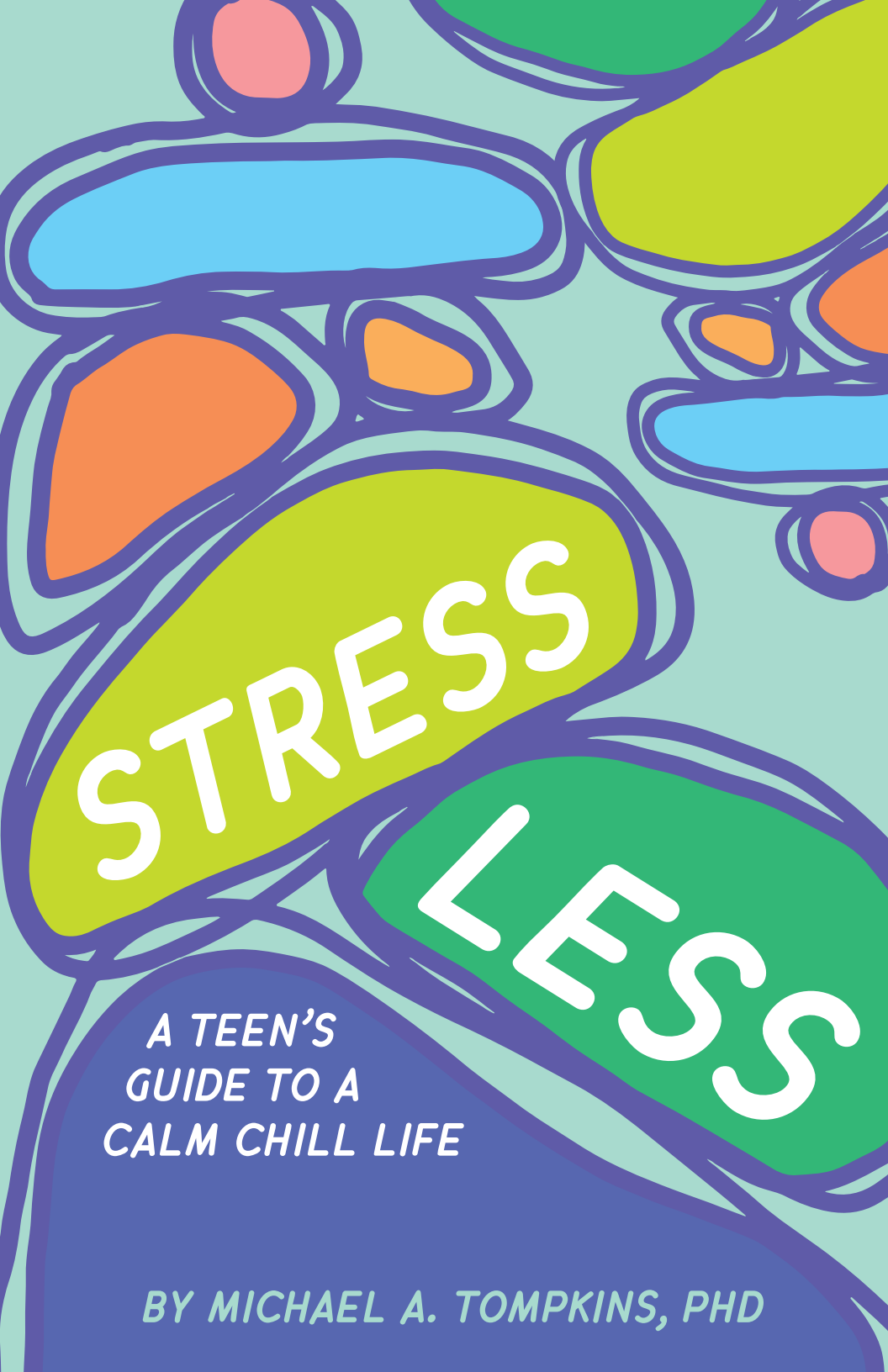


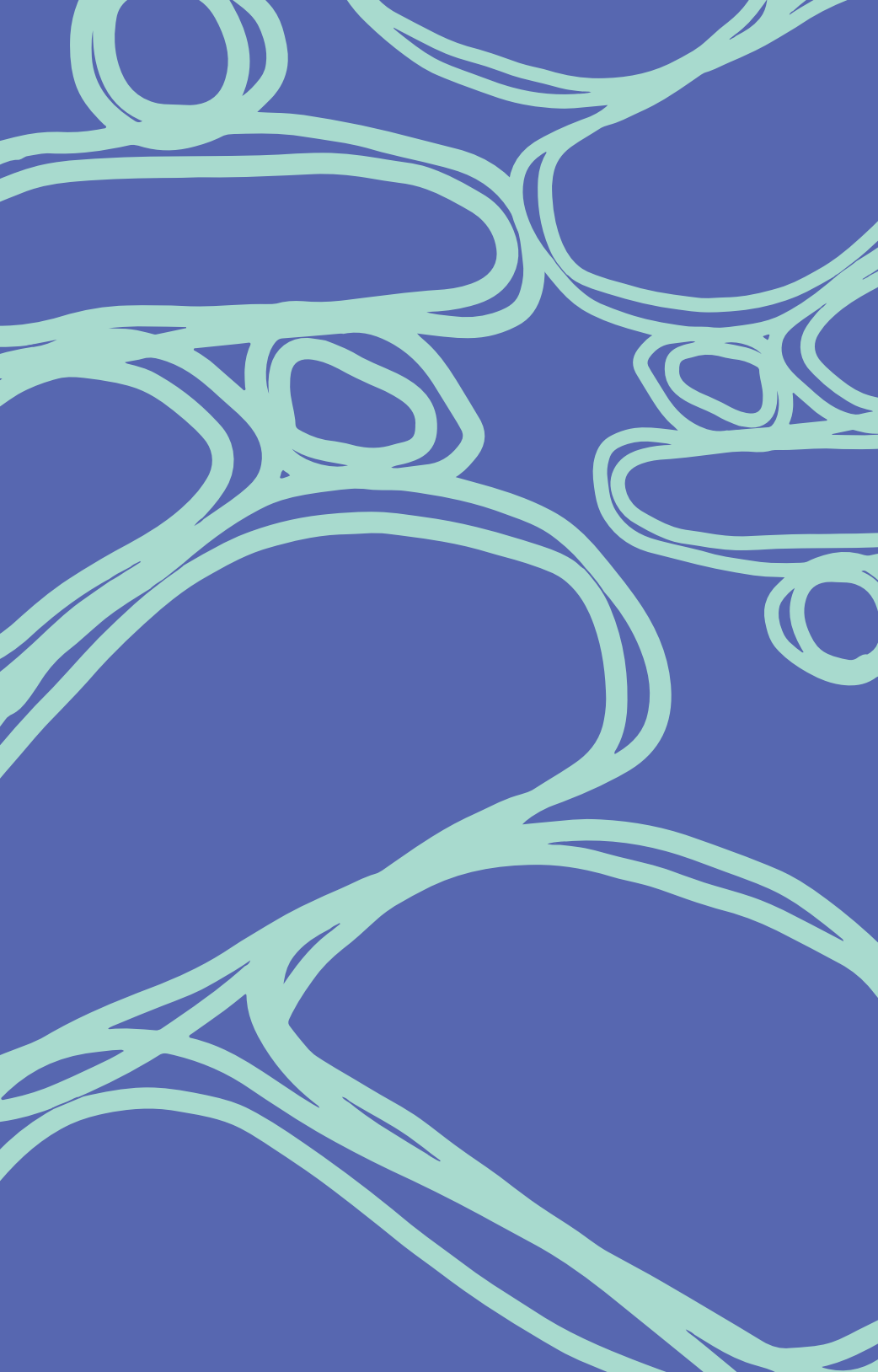


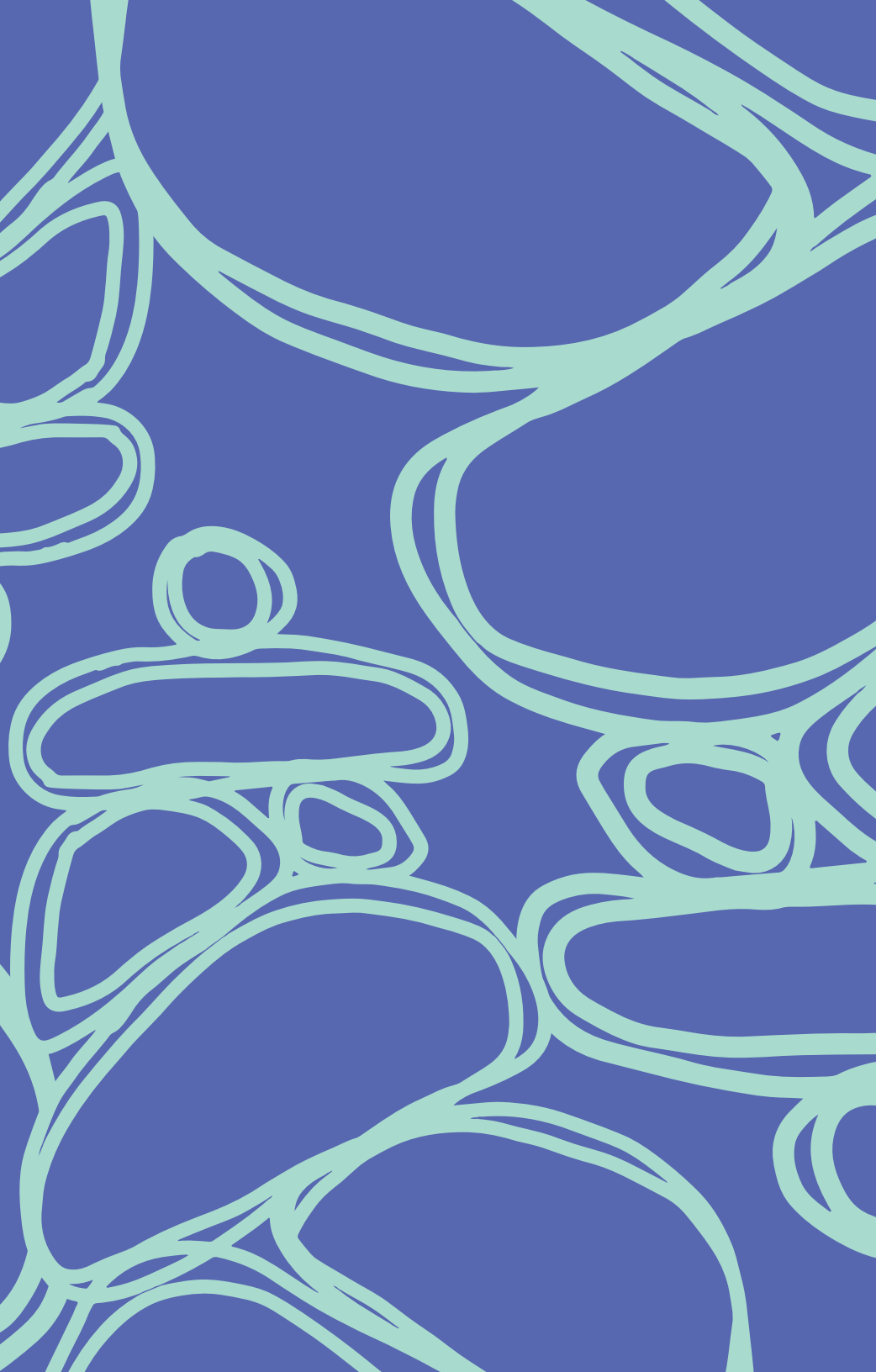
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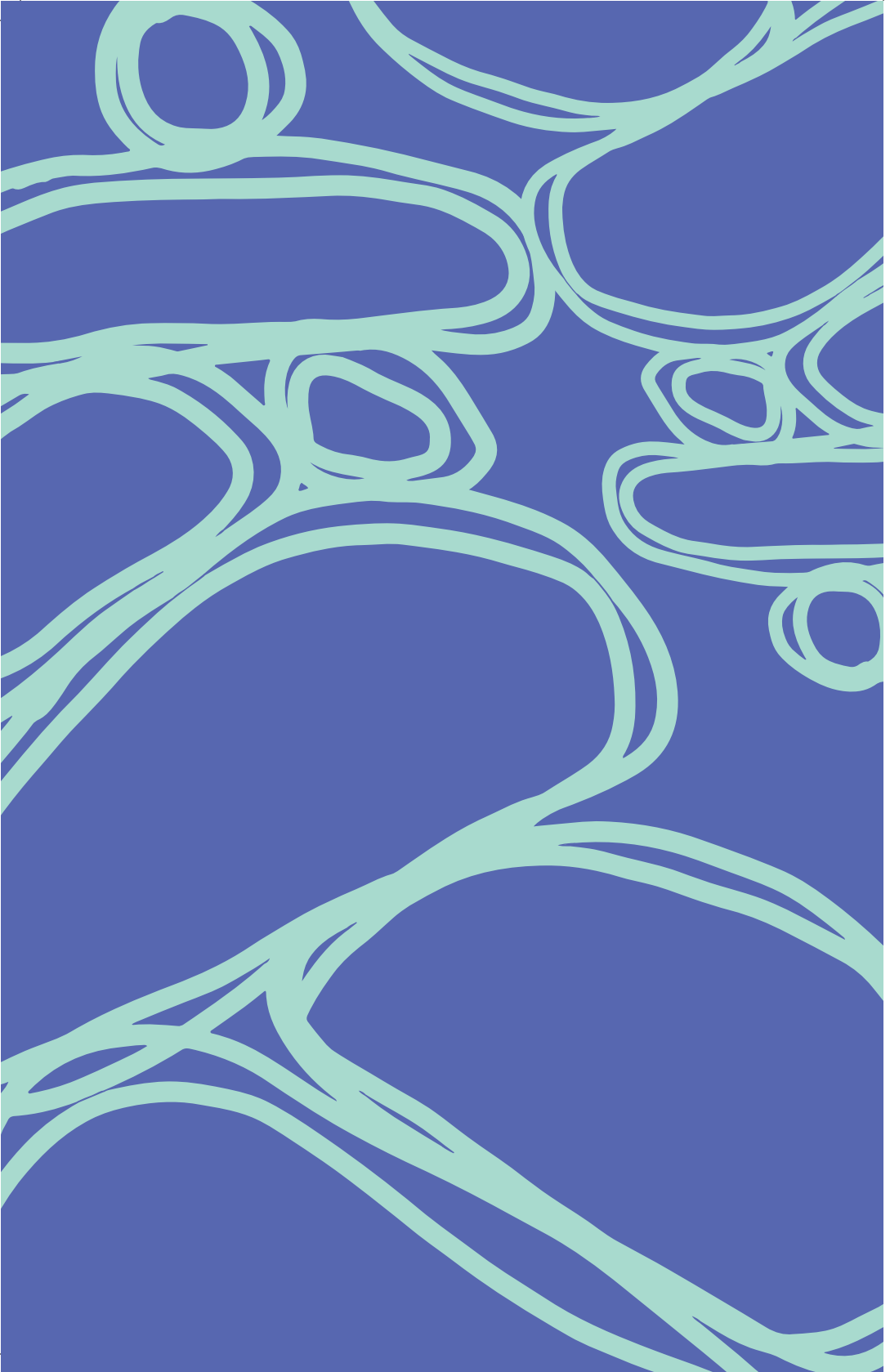
LESS

*A TEEN'S
GUIDE TO A
CALM CHILL LIFE*

BY MICHAEL A. TOMPKINS, PHD







PRAISE FOR STRESS LESS

“Written by a leading expert on emotional wellness in teens, *Stress Less* shares tried and true methods for coping with stress and reducing its impact on your life. This book is packed with practical, step-by-step tips for living well in the face of stress. I highly recommend it!”

Martin M. Antony, PhD

Professor of Psychology, Toronto Metropolitan University
Author of *The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook*
and *The Anti-Anxiety Workbook*

“Dr. Tompkins has done it again! In an increasingly stressful world, this book fills a key gap in the literature, and will undoubtedly be of great help to many youth and families.”

Eric Storch, PhD

McIngvale Presidential Endowed Chair & Professor
Vice Chair & Head of Psychology
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Baylor College of Medicine

“We are in a youth mental health crisis. In this book, Dr. Tompkins provides a practical, down-to-earth guide to help teens identify and cope with stress. This should be recommended reading for every high school student!”

Mary Fristad, PhD

Director, Academic Affairs and Research Development
Nationwide Children’s Hospital Big Lots Behavioral
Health Services
Professor Emerita, The Ohio State University

“In clear language—but never talking down to youth—Tompkins provides essential skills for self-evaluation and coping, in great demand for adolescents of all stripes. Clear as a bell; highly recommended.”

Stephen P. Hinshaw

Distinguished Professor of Psychology, UC Berkeley

Author of *Another Kind of Madness: A Journey Through
the Stigma and Hope of Mental Illness*

“If you could give your teen one book—let it be this one. This is an invaluable resource! So much more than a guide to fielding stress. It is a powerful and thoughtful roadmap for life that will provide a solid foundation for teens for years and years to come.”

Tamar Chansky, PhD

Author of *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety* and *Freeing
Your Child from Negative Thinking*

“With the publication of this top-notch self-help resource, Dr. Tompkins cements his place as a trendsetter in clinical work with teens.”

Robert D. Friedberg, PhD, ABPP

Professor, Head of Pediatric Behavioral Health

Emphasis Area

Director, Center for the Study and Treatment
of Anxious Youth

Professor, Palo Alto University

“Teens—life is stressful. Some people deal with stress better than others. But EVERYONE can benefit from *Stress Less*. I highly recommend it!”

Judith S. Beck, PhD

President of Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy
Clinical Professor of psychology in psychiatry at University
of Pennsylvania

STRESS *LESS*

A Teen's Guide to a
Calm Chill Life

MICHAEL A. TOMPKINS, PhD, ABPP

For Madeleine & Olivia



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Cover design by Rachel Ross

Interior design by Circle Graphics

Printed by Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc., Melrose Park, IL

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tompkins, Michael A., author.

Title: Stress less : a teen's guide to a calm chill life / Michael A. Tompkins, PhD, ABPP.

Description: Washington, DC : Magination Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Stress Less teaches concrete skills for managing stress and anxiety, organized into common "stress domains" such as family, friends, dating, school, and media"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022024548 (print) | LCCN 2022024549 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433837043 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781433837050 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Stress in adolescence--Juvenile literature. | Stress management for teenagers--Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC BF724.3.S86 T66 2023 (print) | LCC BF724.3.S86 (ebook) | DDC 155.9/042--dc23/eng/20220609

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022024548>

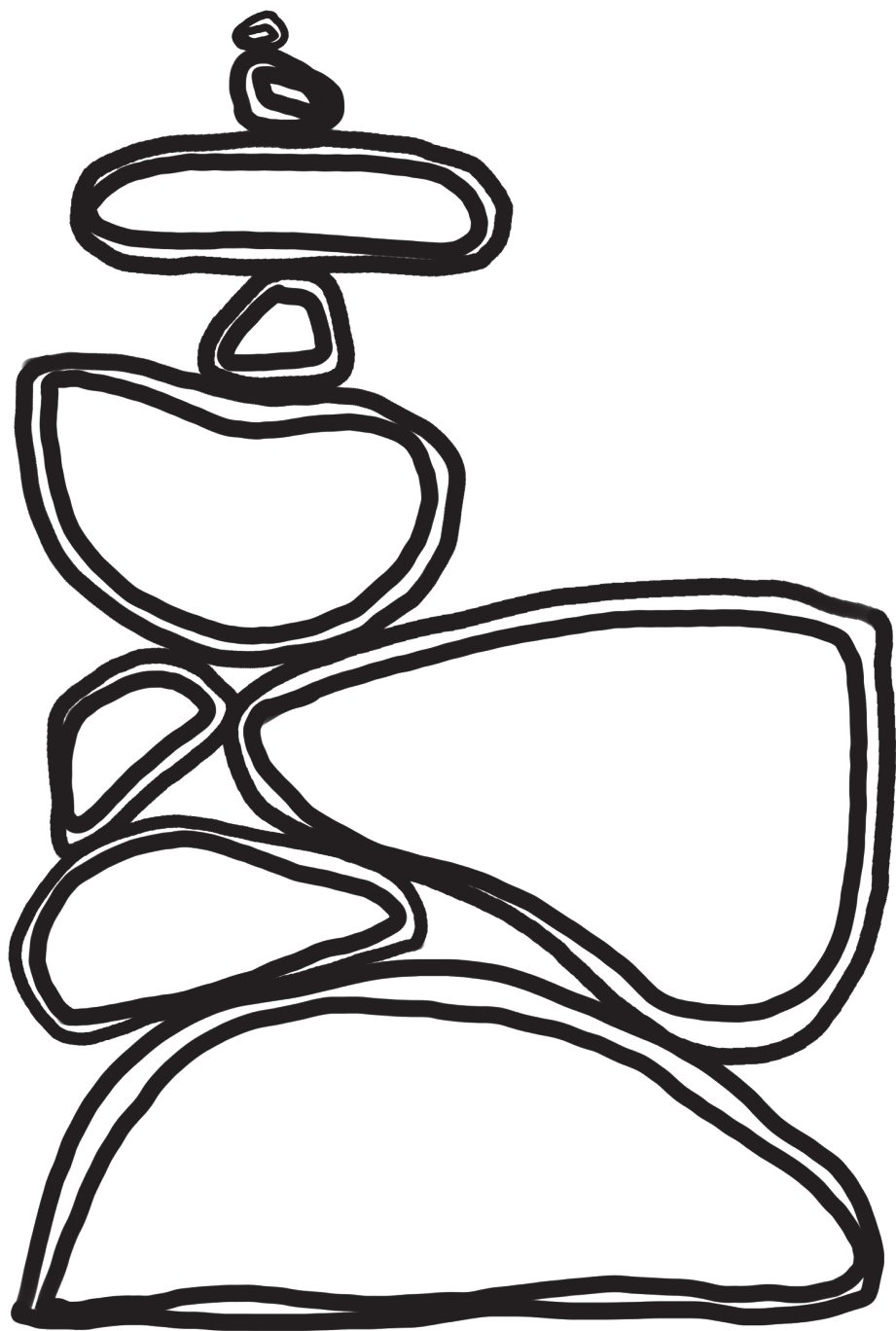
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022024549>

Manufactured in the United States of America

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NOTE TO THE READER

Let's get real. Stress is part of every teen's life, and that's not changing any time soon. There's the 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. You feel overwhelmed, anxious, or down. You don't sleep well or enough; either too little because you're too stressed to settle down at night, or too much because sleep is the only escape from the stress. Stressed teens have chronic headaches or stomach aches and often binge on all the wrong foods. They're often irritable and take it out on their parents, or their siblings, or their friends. Yes, stress is serious business.

Is This Book for You?

If you're reading this book, it's likely someone who cares about you thinks you might be stressed, and that someone might be right. Teens report that their stress levels during the school year are much higher than they believe is healthy.¹ And their

¹2017 Stress in America Survey, American Psychological Association, November, 2017.

stress levels are higher than the stress levels of adults! If you're stressed, the skills in this book will help. In fact, they can help you even if you're not stressed. The strategies in this book are similar to those you might learn in cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), a type of psychotherapy that helps with stress, anxiety, and other kinds of tough situations.

This book will not, however, take the place of counseling. Some teens benefit from the added support of a counselor as they learn and practice stress-busting skills. A counselor can also help you select the skills that are the best fit for you and for what you're dealing with in your life. Speak to your parents if you think a counselor could help you.

How to Use This Book

In Chapter 1, we'll talk about what stress is and how stress makes your life hard. It's not always as obvious as you might think! You'll then learn a model that breaks strategies down into skills for the *inside* and skills for the *outside*. Inside skills help you calm your stressed body and stressed mind, and outside skills help you manage the stressful situations or circumstances that come up in your life. You'll also meet a series of stressed teens and hear their stories. These *stress success stories* appear throughout the book.

In Chapter 2, you'll figure out the particular way stress affects you. You'll learn the ABCs of stress, which can help you recognize the first signs of stress so you know when to use the stress-busting skills in the book.

Chapters 3 to 8 are organized into six areas of life that tend to stress teens the most: school and work; performance and tests; family and friends; dating and relationships; media and technology; and health and hormones. You'll learn skills to manage stress in each of these specific areas.

Finally, in Chapter 9, you'll discover that there's more to life than just busting stress. Feeling happier and more confident are important, too. In this final chapter, you'll learn skills to increase your happiness and self-confidence.

The skills in this book aren't just for teens. That's because stress doesn't go away when you hit adulthood—there's stress galore then, too: a new college, a new job, a new relationship. The skills you'll learn and practice now will help you maintain your balance as you deal with the ups and downs of life in the months and years to come.

As you read through the book, you'll see the following features:



TRY IT features present the skill and how to use it. As mentioned, some skills are *inside* skills. Inside skills are great for calming your body and mind, such as slow deep breathing, meditation, or calm thinking. Then there are *outside* skills for managing the outside world, such as problem solving, communication, or managing time.



TRY IT HERE TOO features remind you that the stress-busting skill you learned can work for stress in another area. For example, the communication stress-busting skills in Chapter 6 (Dating and Relationship Stress) can help with family and friend stress (Chapter 5). Similarly, the assertiveness stress-busting skill in Chapter 5 can help with dating and relationship stress.



STRESS HACK features present brief and simple hacks that add to the stress-busting skill you learned. Sometimes the hack is a variation of the skill you just learned, and other times it's a twist on the skill. For example, the "hit the repeat button" technique is a great addition to the assertiveness skill you'll learn.



IN A NUTSHELL summarizes the main points of the chapter to help you remember what you've learned.

STRESS SKILL QUICK LOCATER. This table is at the end of the book and lists the six stress areas, all the stress management skills in the book, and the page numbers where you can find the skill quickly when you need it.

Getting Started

The skills in this book are easy to learn, but like any skill, whether it's riding a skateboard or playing a piano, it takes some practice to master them. I know what you're thinking: *Where will I find the time? I'm already over-booked and over-worked. Where will I find another minute to learn and practice something new?* I've got great news: Learning these stress-busting skills doesn't take much time at all. Twenty minutes per day is probably all it takes. You can learn on the bus, before bed, or during lunch. Once you learn one skill and see that it helps, you'll likely want to learn another. Learning is like that. You learn one thing and then you learn another; you make one change and then you make another. And before you realize it—you've got it!

GOOD LUCK!

MICHAEL A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER 1

Stress Basics



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 big-time 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:

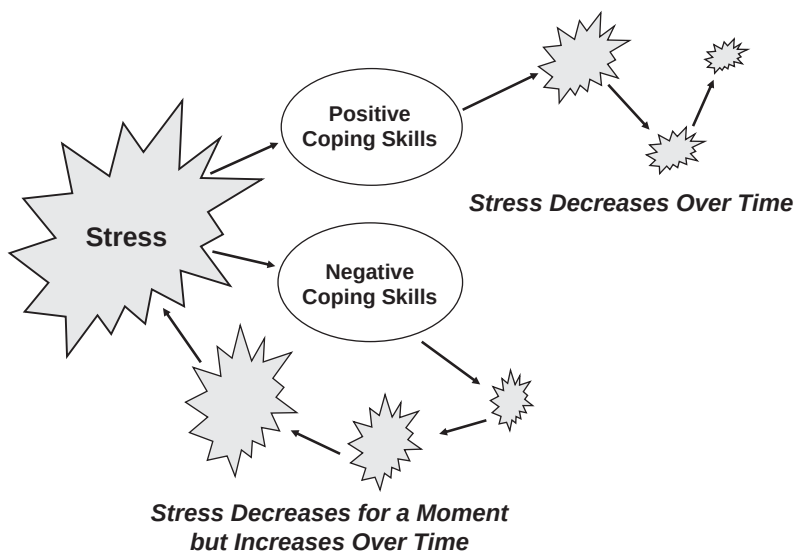
- *Eating too much or too little:* Emotional eating is eating to escape stress and other difficult feelings. You might eat to get your mind off things that are bothering you. You might eat to bury hurt or sadness, or when you're feeling bored or lonely. Sometimes teens try to control their stress by controlling how much they eat. Other times, teens lose their appetites when they're feeling too stressed or anxious. If you're eating too little or too much, reach out to a caring adult for help. Emotional eating is a sign that your stress is too high.
- *Exploding in anger:* When stress builds day after day, you might explode with anger and say and do mean things. If you're stressed about a school essay that's due tomorrow and you're running out of time to complete it, you might throw your book across the room.

You might scream rather than giggle at your brother when he burps at the dinner table. You might roll your eyes at a friend because she has an irritating laugh, although most days you think her laugh is funny. Anger isn't a great way to deal with stress because anger tends to create more and bigger problems for you. You can lose friends, miss important opportunities, or even get yourself expelled from school.

- *Stepping back from life*: Some people deal with stress by stepping back from life. They avoid their responsibilities in order to escape stress and anxiety. Spending time alone in your room because you're too stressed to deal with friends, family members, and the pile of homework on your plate only makes stress worse.
- *Using screens too much*: Screens are an easy way to escape from stress and anxiety. After all, it's easy to grab your phone or another device and chill for an hour or two or three or four, or binge-watch show after show, or play video games into the early morning hours. Too much time on screens, however, makes it difficult for you to get things done, to meet deadlines, and to grow as a person.
- *Using drugs and alcohol*: Some people use drugs and alcohol to escape from stress and anxiety. If you're using drugs and alcohol to deal with stress, anxiety, or even sadness, it's a signal that your stress is too high and that your ability to cope with it is too low. Drug and alcohol use is truly a short-term fix for stress that will only make your life more difficult, more stressful, and less fun.
- *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.

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE COPING SKILLS



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.

Outside and Inside of Stress

Have you ever wondered why tests stress out some of your friends but not others? Or why some friends freak out after a disagreement with a friend, but other friends are cool and calm? Well, what is or isn't stressful comes down to two things: the outside and the inside of stress.

Outside of Stress

You can't have stress without challenges, and you encounter challenges every day. This is the outside of stress: tests, meeting new people, breakups, sports competitions, and arguments with friends, to name a few.

The outside of stress is important, but what's outside (those activities, events and interactions) doesn't explain why these situations stress out some people a lot but don't stress others much at all. The answer is that stress is always the result of the interaction between outside and inside. That's why it's important to have stress-busting skills for both.

Inside of Stress

Now, stress isn't just about the test, the conflict, or the big game. How you think about the challenge affects how stressed you feel, which is the inside of stress. The inside of stress includes two evaluations or assumptions about any event or situation:

- **It's a threat:** If you think an event or situation is a danger or a threat to your well-being, then you'll feel stressed. For example, one person feels stressed if she thinks that she's a failure because she couldn't make a relationship work, but another person doesn't feel stressed because she thinks that she's free from a relationship that wasn't working for her. Also, the degree of threat depends on how big a stake you believe you have in how something turns out. For example,

if you believe that your life is over if you don't get into the college you want, then you'll likely feel intensely stressed by the college application process. However, if you believe that you'll have a good life regardless of the college you attend, then you'll feel less stressed.

- **I can't handle it:** When you think that a situation or event is beyond your ability to handle it, then you'll feel more stress when you face it. For example, consider Lois and Brad, who are in line to receive their flu shot. They both know that the flu shot will hurt, but as Brad stands in line, he thinks, "I can't handle pain. It's too much for me." Lois, on the other hand, thinks that while the flu shot will hurt, she can handle it. Although Brad and Lois will likely feel the same level of pain, Brad will feel far more stressed and anxious about the flu shot than Lois.

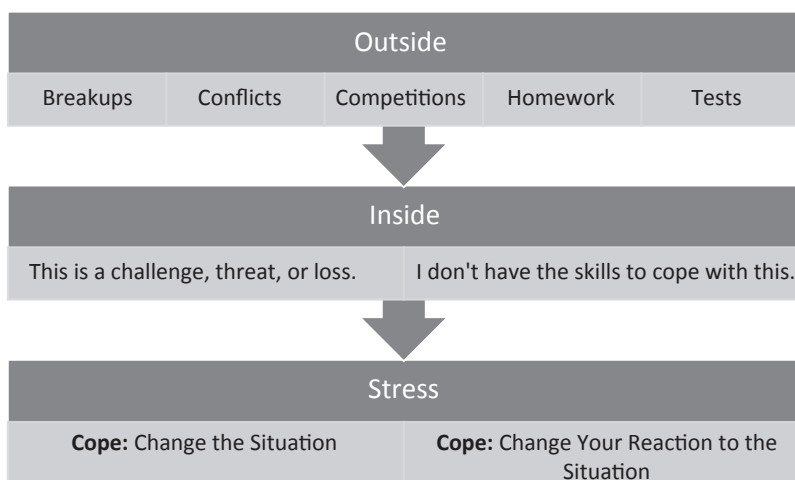
Outside and Inside Stress Coping Skills

Now, let's get to the real reason you're reading this book. You want to learn to cope better with the stressful situations you face every day. To cope better, it's important that you learn skills to manage both the outside and the inside of stress:

- *Outside Coping Skills:* Outside coping skills help you change the environment or situation in some way. For example, clear communication is an outside coping skill because clear communication can change a stressful conversation with a friend (an outside situation) into a conversation that strengthens the friendship rather than damaging it. Similarly, skills to break down tasks, to manage time, and to solve problems all focus on changing the outside situation (tasks, time, problems).

- *Inside Coping Skills:* Inside coping skills help you change your emotional reaction to outside situations. For example, relaxation skills such as visualization or slow deep breathing can help calm your stressed body. Thinking skills can shift the way you think about situations to lessen the stress you feel.

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE MODEL OF STRESS AND COPING

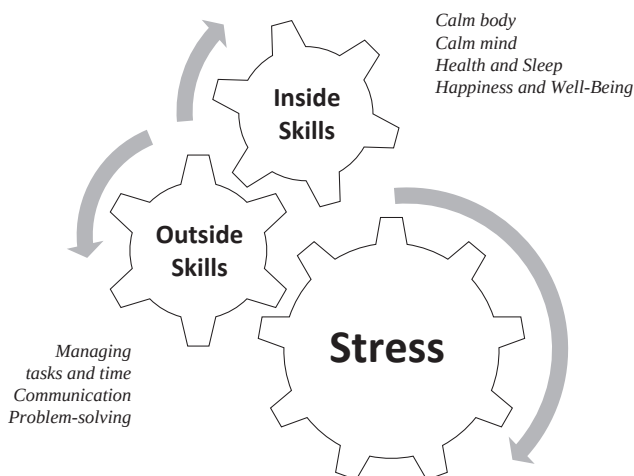


The next section describes the basic types of outside and inside coping skills that appear throughout the book. Often, there are several skills in a basic skill type. For example, clear communication skills, such as assertiveness, resolving conflict, and negotiating, all focus on decreasing stress by improving your interactions with other people.

Outside Stress Skills

Outside stress skills help you change the environment in some way. As you learn and practice skills to handle life's bumps and challenges, whether it's a loss of a best friend, an upcoming big game or test, or a ton of homework, you'll feel better prepared,

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE STRESS COPING SKILLS



more confident, and therefore less stressed. Here are the types of outside stress coping skills:

Managing Tasks and Time Skills

One of the biggest stresses for teens is too many things to do and not enough time to do them. Therefore, skills to manage tasks and time are essential stress coping skills. For example, dividing large tasks into smaller tasks decreases your stress but it also decreases the likelihood that you'll put off starting tasks until the last minute. And speaking of time, skills that help you schedule your time and accurately estimate the time a task will take help you manage the time you have effectively. You'll learn additional outside skills in this category, such as skills to manage distraction, to procrastinate less, to stay on top of your social media and device use, and to schedule your activities throughout the day (including time to sleep!).

Communication Skills

As important as friends and family are to most teens, these relationships can be stressful too, particularly if you lack effective communication skills. Good communication skills will also help you to stand up for yourself, negotiate, and de-escalate conflict, which will help you feel less stressed and more confident in your interactions with friends, family, teachers, boss—you name it! Communication skills also include things like how to take feedback, forgive, and set healthy boundaries.

Problem-Solving Skills

Nothing is more stressful than having a problem that you don't know how to solve. As a busy teen, you likely encounter problems every day and often all day long: big problems, small problems, and problems in between. Whether it's a problem with a friend, with a teacher, or how to find time to complete an essay, problem-solving skills are an essential set of outside skills to include in your stress-management toolbox.

Inside Stress Skills

Inside skills change your emotional reaction to outside events and challenges. Your emotional reaction includes your stressed thoughts and your stressed body. Therefore, inside stress management skills include calm body skills and calm mind skills:

Calm Body Skills

Calm body skills focus on calming your stressed body. Because different people benefit from different calm body skills, it's important to have a variety of them to try. These can include things like progressive muscle relaxation, slow deep breathing, and positive imagery, to name a few. Try all the calm body skills in the book at least once and then pick one or two that work best for you. To benefit fully from the skill, practice it often. It takes