



Reflect and discuss

# Stress and coping strategies



Stress is our body's response to threats or challenges, such as dealing with a bully or taking a driver's test. But we can also get stressed from just thinking about threatening things that could happen in the future, like a break-up, a bad mark in math, or a conflict with a co-worker.

Our stress response is both normal and useful. It gives us the boost we need to jump out of the way of a speeding truck, or rise up against injustice and inequality. A healthy amount of stress can help us succeed at school, work or on the sports field. But too much stress for too long can be harmful to our mental and physical health. It can also be hard on our relationships.

Here's how it works: When we're worried or angry, our bodies become flooded with energy. There are changes in our breathing and blood pressure. We may feel the urge to fight or escape. Or may go numb or dissociate.

When the threat is gone, our bodies become flooded with calming chemicals. That's because our minds and bodies are meant to be balanced and calm most of the time. After all, when we're calm and relaxed, our brains work better and we make better decisions.

When we're stressed, our thinking gets clouded and confused. If we're stressed often or for long periods of time, we can become mentally and physically ill.

Sometimes the stuff that stresses us out is beyond our control or seems too big, such as a difficult parent, an unfair policy, or climate change. In these cases, we have to find ways to cope so the problem doesn't bring us down, make us sick, or make us feel like giving up.

Some forms of coping with stress are healthier than others. Taking good care of ourselves is key. Getting enough sleep, nutrition, exercise and social time can help us stay steady.

But it's not always easy. Some people manage stress by throwing themselves into their studies or workouts, or by distracting themselves with gaming or shopping. Others go overboard with food, romance or psychoactive substances such as tobacco, alcohol or cannabis.

We all know stress is part of life. But we don't always realize that taking care of ourselves in basic ways can help us keep our stress in balance and build resilience. Being resilient means not only surviving stress but thriving in the wake of tough times.



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## Activity steps

1. Play **Stress and coping strategies**.
2. Give each participant an What does mental health mean to you? handout and walk through the contents.
3. Arrange participants into pairs or small groups and invite them to talk about and write answers to the 'reflect and discuss' questions.
4. Debrief as a larger group.
5. Give participants time to 'get creative.'

## Reflect and discuss

### Stress

- Brainstorm a list of stressors and identify the ones you feel you can control and the ones that seem out of your control or too big.
- Choose one or two from each list to work through. Identify the specific steps, skills and people needed to address or manage the situations.

### Coping

- What are some of the things you do to take care of yourself? Why?
- What are you most likely to 'go overboard' about? Why?
- What are some things you can do to 'catch yourself' before you go overboard?

## Get creative!

What does resilience look like to you? Draw an animal, object or scenario that reflects surviving and thriving.

## References

- **Strong Minds Strong Kids:** [Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency Grade 9-12](#)
- **Here to Help:** [Substance Use and Young People](#)

## Resources

- [MentalHealthLiteracy.org](https://www.mentalhealthliteracy.org/)
- [Wise Practices](#) and [A Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth](#)
- [Jack.org](https://www.jack.org/)