

## Stress Reduction and Mental Hygienics

As we know, adolescent mental health has been a growing issue in our culture for a long while now. Increases in anxiety, eating disorders, depression, suicidal ideation, and a great many other mental health concerns have consistently appeared in youth over the last few decades. Today, it's estimated that as many as 1 in 7 people ages 12-19 are currently experiencing a mental health condition. These conditions can be situational, meaning they are brought on by the youth's current environment or events, or clinical, meaning they persist regardless of what the adolescent is experiencing. Whether their concerns are situational or clinical, or even if they aren't experiencing any mental health concerns at all, equipping youth with tools to boost their resilience and decrease stress is vital to preparing them for the difficulties of life, both today and in the future.

One potential aspect of this is teaching youth to practice good mental health hygiene. This can take shape in a variety of ways, with the goal of hitting a "mental reset button". Doctor Hui Qi Tong, of Stanford University, suggests that mental health hygiene need only include "simple practices that improve our quality of life by preventing negative behaviors and providing emotional stability". For instance, a few minutes of meditation or a brief walk in the morning may be sufficient exercises. The key difference from doing these in a traditional sense is to focus on "turning off the auto-pilot". The entire process should be done manually, while thinking only about what one is doing while one is doing it. For example, if the activity is teeth-brushing, one should focus solely on the experience of the feeling of the brush on their teeth, the motion of brushing, the feeling of the water and taste of the toothpaste. If the activity is a brief walk, one could focus on the feeling of the breeze, the sounds of animals or cars, and the swinging of their arms. If the mind begins to wander elsewhere, the goal is to relinquish that thought and bring it back to the exercise. While this may appear to be a simple act, in actuality, setting aside phones, TVs, or concerns for the day is an extremely hard skill to learn. In addition to its calming effects, this practice serves to boost attention span. With the ubiquity of phones and computers, particularly in youth's lives, attention boosting exercises have more importance than ever before and can serve to improve both their emotional control and their performance in school.

Other exercises can be done to help youth deal with stress as it comes up. While it can be challenging during extreme stress, writing about thoughts and feelings can be an excellent way for youth to learn where their sources of frustration are. The constant pressure from their school, social, and family lives can make it challenging to recognize where their stress really lies. Writing their thoughts, whether it's with a regular journal or just as needed, allows them a space free from consequences where they can vent, as well as avoid lashing out due to pent up anger.

In a similar way, having teens write about what they're grateful for has been shown to help fight negative emotions. The more specific they are, the better.

While these tools can be useful in decreasing stress and boosting resilience, there are many others to try as well. A few of these are:

- **Regular Exercise:** While most youth don't reach this goal, it's recommended that they achieve 60 minutes of exercise daily. This can be a great way to relieve stress, on top of keeping active.
- **Prioritizing Sleep:** Properly regulating sleep is something everyone struggles with nowadays. Blue lights and caffeine tend to be prevalent at all times of day for youth, but helping them regulate phone usage and caffeine intake before bed can help them sleep more soundly and improve mood throughout the day.
- **Combat Negative Self-Talk:** For many teens, it is easy to fall into a habit of doubting themselves and their capabilities. When presented with this, it's important to refute that statement. Having them talk through why they're saying the statement and seeing why it's incorrect assists much more than only denying the claim.

Youth mental health can be extremely challenging to support. They're experiencing a period of great change while exploring who they are and who they are becoming. Instilling in them the importance of proper stress fighting habits and mental hygiene can help them not only now but as they move forward with their lives, heading to college and becoming adults. For more resources on mental hygiene, stress reduction, and coping mechanisms, feel free to check out the links below.

<https://scipnebraska.com/>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health>

<https://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2022/05/11/mental-health-hygiene-can-improve-mood-decrease-stress/>

<https://www.apa.org/topics/children/stress>

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Teenagers-With-Stress-066.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Helping-Teenagers-With-Stress-066.aspx)

<https://www.nami.org/Get-Involved/Awareness-Events/Mental-Illness-Awareness-Week#:~:text=Since%201990%2C%20when%20Congress%20officially,Support%20Groups>