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## The Story on Stress

Have you ever felt sick to your stomach during a test? Have you had days when you were so loaded down with homework that you had trouble sleeping? Have you ever been so worried about something that you ended up with a terrible headache?

If so, then you know what it's like to feel **stress**. You've probably heard people say, "Wow, I'm really stressed out" or "This is making me totally stressed." Maybe you hear adults say those kinds of things all the time. But kids have lots of things going on in their lives that can cause stress, too.

### What Is Stress?

Stress is what you feel when you are worried or uncomfortable about something. This worry in your mind can make your body feel bad. You may feel angry, frustrated, scared, or afraid — which can give you a stomachache or a headache.

When you're stressed you may not feel like sleeping or eating, or you might sleep or eat too much. You also may feel cranky or have trouble paying attention at school and remembering things at home.

### What Causes Stress?

Plenty of things can cause stress in a kid's life. The trick is to remember that some types of stress are good and others are bad. Good or normal stress might show up when you're called on in class or when you have to give a report. Have you ever gotten butterflies in your stomach or sweaty hands? Those can be signs of good stress — the kind of stress that can help you to get things done. For example, you may do a better job on your book report if the anxiety inspires you to prepare well before you get up and read it to the class.

But bad stress can happen if the stressful feelings keep going over time. You may not feel well if your parents are fighting, if a family member is sick, if you're having problems at school, or if you're going through anything else that makes you upset every day. That kind of stress isn't going to help you, and it can actually make you sick.

Once you recognize that you're feeling stressed, there are several things you can do. You can try talking about what's bothering you with an adult you trust, like a parent or teacher. Bring up what's been on your mind and how it makes you feel. An adult may have ideas about how to solve whatever is worrying you or making you uncomfortable.

### Are You Too Busy?

If you're feeling tired and stressed because you have too much going on, like lots of after-school activities, you might feel better if you drop something, even if it's just for a semester or so. Sometimes lots of activities — even if they're all fun — can make you feel stressed by keeping you busy all the time. On the other hand, if problems at home are bugging you, some (but not too many!) after-school activities may actually help you relax and feel better.

There are also relaxation exercises that you can use to get rid of stress. The easiest one to do is to **inhale** (breathe in) slowly and deeply through your nose, and then **exhale** (breathe out) slowly through your mouth. Do this two to four times, but don't take in too much air too quickly because it can make you feel lightheaded and dizzy.

Another exercise can help you if you're having trouble sleeping: tense and relax your muscles slowly, starting at your toes and working your way up your body. Tense and relax your toes. Then do the same with your toes and your ankles. Then, your toes, ankles, and calves. Then toes, ankles, calves, and thighs. Keep going up your body until you get to the top of your head!

You can do exercises like these anytime, without anyone noticing. You can even do breathing exercises in class if you're nervous before a test.

### Finding a Balance

The best way to keep stress away is to have a balanced life. That means making good decisions about how to spend your time. If you're only dealing with school stuff and have no time to play, you can get stressed. Make sure you keep your **SELF** in mind: Sleep, Exercise, Leisure (something fun), and Food.

If you take care of yourself and get enough sleep and food, and if you exercise and leave time for fun stuff, you'll probably be less stressed out!

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