

Study without Stress: Supporting Stressed Students

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Centre For Emotional Health



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- Centre for Research Excellence
 - www.centreforemotionalehealth.com.au
 - Research and teaching on a range of mental health issues including anxiety, depression, stress, substance abuse, and health psychology right across the lifespan
 - Incorporates the Emotional Health Clinic
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Why do students feel stressed?

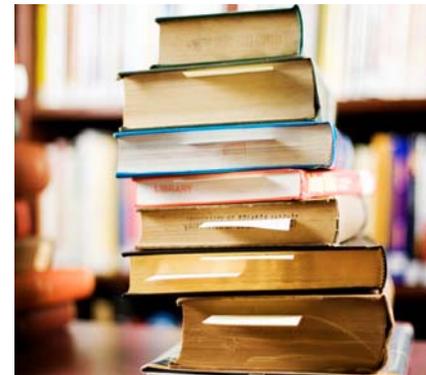


Youth Mental Health Report (Mission Australia & Black Dog institute, 2014) survey of 14, 461 adolescents aged 15-19 years.

Top two stressors for youth were:

- 1) coping with stress
- 2) school and study stress

- Workloads and deadlines
- Increasing task difficulty
- Expectations from teachers, schools, parents, and students themselves
- Juggling school work & life
- Performance anxiety
- Friendships and relationships
- etc



Is All This Stress Bad For You?



-
- *Yes & No*
 - **Stress**
 - is simply a 'state of readiness' activated by the body's “flight or fight” system
 - is a completely natural and necessary response experienced by all humans and animals

Flight or Fight



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- Natural response controlled by the two branches of the body's autonomic nervous system
 1. Sympathetic nervous system releases energy and prepares the body for Fight or Flight
 - Heart beats faster (moves blood to arm and leg muscles)...tingling, dizziness
 - Increased breathing rate (provides more oxygen for body)...results in feelings of constriction, choking, smothering, chest pains
 2. The Parasympathetic nervous system returns the body to a relaxed state

Fight or Flight Response



Blood clotting ability increases to prepare for possible injury

Mind becomes alert

Sweating increases to help cool the body



Less saliva – dry mouth

Breathing rate increases- dizzy

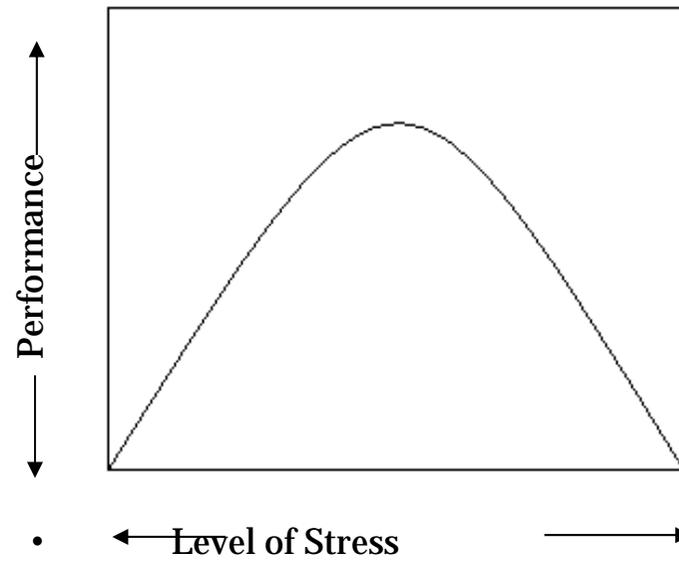
Blood is redirected to the legs and arms

Digestion slows down- upset tummy

Muscles tense ready for action

Is All Stress Bad?

YERKES-DOBSON LAW



What is normal? When do I need to worry?



NORMAL

- Temporary stress in response to stressors
- Stress comes and goes
- Mostly not stressed
- Not more stressed than peers

ABNORMAL

- More stressed than peers
- Impacts on school work, friendships, family life
- Avoid doing things that peers can do (athletics carnival, sleep overs, school camp)
- Makes them unhappy or frequently distressed

Anxiety & Mood Disorders



Anxiety Disorders exist when:

- The fear/worry is excessive compared to that experienced by peers or is age-inappropriate
- The fear/worry leads to avoidance of events
- The fear/worry causes significant distress and/or significant interference in daily activities

Mood Disorders (depression) exist when:

- Low OR irritable mood OR loss of pleasure is present most of the day, nearly every day for more than two weeks
- AND weight loss, sleep difficulties, agitation, excessive fatigue, excessive guilt, difficulty concentrating (nearly everyday), or suicidal thinking/self-harm
- Mood causes significant distress and/or interference in life

Prevalence (%) of Anxiety & Depression

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SURVEY OF THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS (LAWRENCE ET AL., 2015)



Table 2-2: 12-month prevalence of mental disorders among 4-17 year-olds by sex and age group

Disorder	Males 4-11 years (%)	Males 12-17 years (%)	Females 4-11 years (%)	Females 12-17 years (%)	Persons 4-11 years (%)	Persons 12-17 years (%)
Anxiety disorders	7.6	6.3	6.1	7.7	6.9	7.0
Major depressive disorder	1.1	4.3	1.2	5.8	1.1	5.0
ADHD	10.9	9.8	5.4	2.7	8.2	6.3
Conduct disorder	2.5	2.6	1.6	1.6	2.0	2.1
Any mental disorder	16.5	15.9	10.6	12.8	13.6	14.4

Missed Days of School

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION



Table 4-9: Average days absent from school in the past 12 months due to anxiety symptoms among 4-17 year-olds with anxiety disorders by age group

Anxiety disorder	4-11 years (days absent)	12-17 years (days absent)	4-17 years (days absent)
Social phobia	8	20	15
Separation anxiety	6	30	14
Generalised anxiety	10	22	17
Obsessive-compulsive	7	22	14
Any anxiety disorder	6	20	12

Table 3-9: Average days absent from school in past 12 months due to depressive symptoms among 4-17 year-olds with major depressive disorder by age group

Age group	Average days absent
4-11 years	14
12-17 years	23
4-17 years	20

Anxiety at School

SLIDE 1



General anxiety

- Worry about everything – health, friends, family, grades, performances, getting into trouble, making mistakes
- Often well behaved but may break rules if anxiety gets very high eg skipping class
- Sick days at particular times (eg sports, school camp, tests)
- Seeks frequent reassurance
- Spend excessive amount of time on their school work
- Upset by changes to routine eg sports day, substitute teacher
- Often hesitant to try new or different things
- Perfectionistic with school work and/or performances
- Poor concentration when worrying, headaches, stomach aches, poor sleep
- Frequent text messages to mum/dad

Anxiety at School

SLIDE 2



Social anxiety

- Very fearful of negative evaluation
- Severe fear of public speaking, reading aloud
- Rarely volunteers information in class or asks for assistance
- Small group of friends
- Find group work difficult
- Embarrassed easily - may blush, shake, or mumble when answering questions or giving presentations
- Worries about performances –athletics, music etc
- May show poor social skills (eg poor eye contact)
- Excessive worry about appearance
- Avoids being assertive and standing up for themself
- Some kids will avoid these things at all costs eg absenteeism

Anxiety at School

SLIDE 3



Separation Anxiety

- Difficulty separating from parents (home alone, parents away)
- Difficulty with sleep overs
- Frequent text messaging to parents
- Avoid school camps

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

- Rigid routines, order, or organisation (belongings, work, etc)
- Superstitious or magical beliefs about dangers (if this, then that)
- Hesitant to touch certain things or cleans surreptitiously
- Long periods in bathroom – raw hands

Why Are Some More Stressed?



-
- Biological & Environmental Factors
 - Cognitive Factors
 - Behavioural Factors



Biological & Environmental Factors



-
- Genetic vulnerability to stress, anxiety and depression
 - Anxious students are more stressed by academic challenges
 - Poor lifestyle habits
 - Poor sleep
 - Poor diet
 - Family disruption
 - Lack of family support
 - Excessive parental expectations
 - Research in HSC students indicates that this is a key component to academic stress

Cognitive Factors



-
- Negative thinking style
 - Believe their world is full of negatives
 - Believe they have less ability to cope with the stressors
 - Absence of negative thinking associated is a protective factor associated with decreased stress in HSC students (Robinson et al., 2009)
 - Perfectionism associated with increased distress in HSC students
 - Socially prescribed perfectionism, where individuals feel others expect them to be perfect

Behavioural Factors



The actions we take in response to stress can also add to *or* relieve stress

- Perfectionistic behaviours
- Poor Time Management
- Over Commitment
- Poor Life/Study Balance
- Self-handicapping behaviours
 - procrastination, sabotage, avoidance



What Can Parents Do to Help?



Common Sense things



-
- Identify students who are struggling early and get professional help
 - Adequate sleep
 - Help encourage relaxation – use apps, CDs of guided meditations, exercise and fun stuff
 - Nutritious food eaten regularly
 - Regular exercise
 - Study/life balance
 - Can't be all study
 - Can't be all play

Attention and Praise



-
- Positive attention and praise are powerful motivators
 - Listen supportively
 - Don't Nag
 - It is unlikely to motivate them
 - Think about how you can praise your child and give them positive feedback when they make progress towards managing their stress
 - The best positive attention comes from parents

Routine, Time Management



Encourage responsibility & independence (collaborative approach)

- Study plan – best days to do schoolwork
- Organise a space for them to work that is suitable
- Check in each week when things are due and put them on a calendar - plan when they will get done
- Study BEFORE fun time, use screen time as a REWARD for studying, not before or during study time. Study early in the evening not late.
- It might be helpful to keep them on track with study (but only with their permission and do it according to their guidelines otherwise you' ll be nagging)

- However, this is a learning process – so try and be patient

- Remember to use praise and positive attention when they do make an effort that approximates the behaviour you are looking for

Minimise Stressful Thoughts

A lot of stress has to do with the way we think



Common Unhelpful Thoughts



-
- This is too hard
 - I can't do this
 - I have to remember everything
 - There is not enough time
 - If I don't do well I won't get anywhere
 - When I get to the exams my mind will go blank
 - I must do really well in every assessment to get a good overall mark
 - I won't be able to get a good job if I don't do well
 - If I get a bad mark, people will think I am stupid
 - Nobody understands what it is like (especially my parents)

Keep Beliefs about Academic Performance Realistic



-
- Stressed children:
 - Think in disasters
 - Overestimate how bad failure is
 - Underestimate their ability
 - Aim to increase realistic appraisals of schoolwork
 - Learning opportunities – okay to make mistakes
 - Won't always do exceptionally well (don't have to be good at everything)

Example



Stressor	Thoughts	Action
Upcoming Exam	<i>"I'll fail"</i>	<i>Avoid Procrastinate</i>
	<i>"I can't do it"</i>	
	<i>"This is stupid"</i>	
	<i>"I don't feel confident, I'll go over the material again. I don't usually fail so if I keep studying I will probably do ok"</i>	<i>Study</i>
	<i>"Yes this is hard, but I only have a few weeks till it is over, I can get through this"</i>	<i>Study</i>

Manage Your Own Expectations as a Parent



-
- Create supportive environment - reduce pressure, be realistic
 - Don't get caught in your own unhelpful thinking
 - *"They won't get anywhere in life"*
 - *"They are avoiding this on purpose"*
 - *"If they don't get a good mark they won't get a good job"*
 - *"People will think badly of them/me/our family"*
 - Remember there is life beyond school and try to help your adolescent to see this
 - Talk positively about the future

How to get students to face fears

REDUCE AVOIDANCE



- Indirect
 - not letting them out of tasks completely
 - increase expectations of what they need to do (less help by parents)
 - provide them with less reassurance over time
 - more praise to brave behaviour
- Direct
 - Ask what you can do to help? It might be helpful to read over draft essays, listen to them explain a theory, test them on formulas, go over quotes, get them tutoring for material they don't understand (with permission)
 - Ask “what can you do to make the task a little easier so that you will feel more confident to try and do it?” (rather than allowing them to avoid it altogether)
 - Create a plan for how they can practice doing the task e.g. practice exams and speeches, doing less drafts (for perfectionists)

Study Tips for Students



-
- **Make a List & Break Tasks Down**
 - Write out what you want to achieve in a study period and cross off tasks as you achieve them
 - **Study Schedule**
 - Make a schedule to study at a **Set Time**, and to have breaks at a **Set Time for a Limited Time Period**
 - **Use Rewards**
 - Study for a set period of time and then reward yourself with a favorite TV program or time out.
 - **Study Grazing (to get into the groove of studying)**
 - Study for 10 minutes at a time, followed by a 5 minute break Repeat. Repeat. Repeat until you are studying effectively.

Tips Continued



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- Switch to a Different Study Task or Location
 - If you are really having trouble concentrating, trying switching to a different topic or location (e.g. Library). If you switch to a different topic/subject make time to come back to it later.
 - Allocation of Realistic Time Frames
 - Allocate the right proportion of time to the task. Procrastinators need to be careful not to underestimate how long they need to study, perfectionists need to use time frames to keep them moving through material even if they haven't perfected it
 - Write Drafts
 - A draft is a draft and is not meant to be perfect
 - Manage Distracting Technology
 - Turn your phone on flight mode during study blocks.
 - Use activating your phone as a reward for studying.



Summary

TAKE HOME MESSAGE



1. Stress is common and normal (it should fluctuate)
2. Stress that is chronic, or if a student is more stressed than peers, and it is impacting broadly on their life get additional help
 - School counsellor
 - GP for referral to a psychologist
 - Cognitive behavioural therapy
3. Work collaboratively with your child to find solutions
4. Keep your own expectations (and emotions) in check

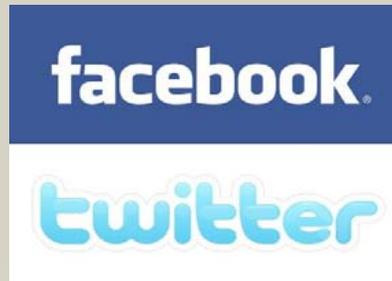


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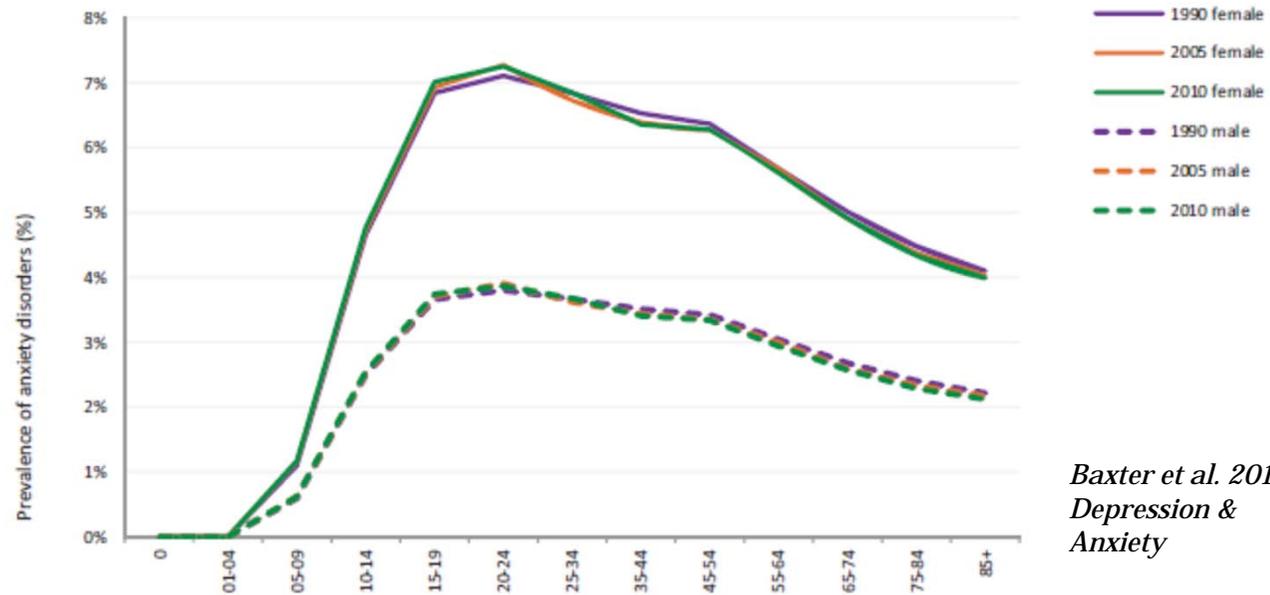
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No increase in anx dep over 20yrs



*Baxter et al. 2014
Depression &
Anxiety*