BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®

HEALTHYTIPSNEWSLETTER

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EFFECTS OF TEEN STRESS

STRESS—GOOD OR BAD?

Like it or not, psychosocial stress is a part of life. Contrary to popular belief, stress is not necessarily bad for us. Challenges and demands that teens believe they can manage effectively can be stimulating and add to their enjoyment of life. This is "good stress" or, as Drs. Hans Seyle and Richard Lazarus termed it, "eustress." By contrast, when teens perceive situations to be overwhelming or difficult to cope with, they experience negative or chronic psychosocial stress that can lead to mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral concerns.

WHAT CAUSES THE STRESS RESPONSE?

Life events, the "fight or flight" response, and personal types all have something to do with chronic psychosocial stress. In addition, Drs. Lazarus and Folkman changed the way in which we understand stress by pointing out that thoughts are an important part of the stress cycle. They believe that we all interpret situations based on our previous experience and knowledge and, consequently, different people can react differently to the same stress-provoking events.

TYPES OF STRESS RESPONSES IN TEENS

Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child identifies three different physical responses to stress that are useful to understand if you are working with youth: positive, tolerable, and toxic.

- **Positive stress response:** This is a brief increase in the heart rate and mild increases of stress hormone levels.
- **Tolerable stress response:** This occurs when the body's alerting system is activated to a greater degree because of a longer-lasting stress-provoking situation. This is what we consider chronic stress within the SCOUTStrong material. This is reversible if the situation is a short-term one and the teen has positive relationships that can help him cope effectively.
- **Toxic stress response:** This may occur when a teen is exposed to strong, frequent, or prolonged difficulty and lacks the support of positive relationships. In this case, the long-term activation of the stress response may result in changes in brain and physical development that persist into adulthood.

SCOUTStrong™
FIT • FUEL • FUN

The SCOUTStrong™ Healthy Living Initiative is the incorporation of active lifestyles, healthy eating, and emotional fitness into the foundation of what the BSA is ultimately about—a place for youth to get outdoors, have fun, and have the adventure of a lifetime.

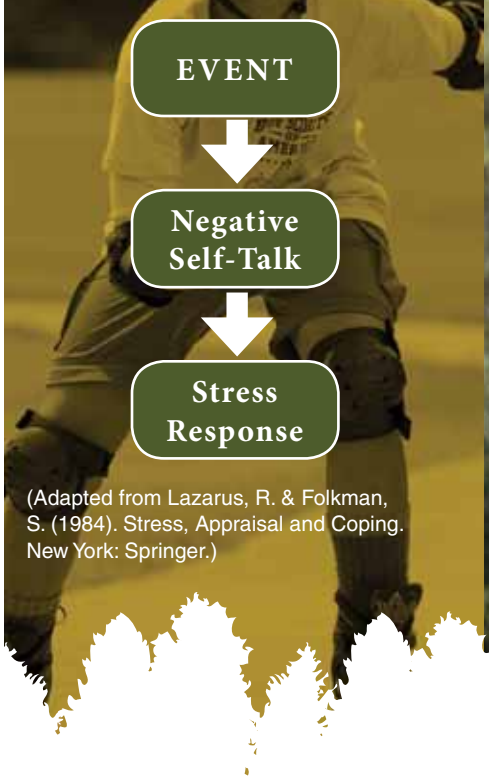
The purpose of the Healthy Tips Newsletter is to present interesting and relevant health-related information and resources that can better prepare Scouts and those around them to meet the increasing challenges facing youth in modern life.

Have a question, comment, and/or concern? We'd love to hear from you! Send us an email at SCOUTStrong.Admin@scouting.org.

THE STRESS CYCLE

There are three steps in the stress cycle created by Lazarus and Folkman.

1. A stress-provoking event occurs. These events can include crises, losses, changes (either positive or negative), or simply the hassles of everyday life.
2. Then, your self-talk kicks in. You evaluate the event mentally and decide whether it poses a threat to you, and whether you have sufficient resources to cope with the demands of the situation. This is the point at which you decide whether the situation is stressful for you. Your decision will either trigger the stress response or eliminate the need for it.
3. Finally, the stress response occurs, and your physical and mental function, emotions, and behaviors change as a result.



(Adapted from Lazarus, R. & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, Appraisal and Coping. New York: Springer.)

THE STRESS RESPONSE

The stress response is based on a primitive reaction called the fight-or-flight-or-freeze response, as identified by physiologist Dr. Walter Cannon and studied further by Dr. Hans Seyle. This response prepares the mind and body for self-defense—that is, either to fight or to get out of the situation. It involves a complex chain of physical reactions:

- The sympathetic nervous system is stimulated.
- The body releases stress hormones (adrenalin, cortisone, thyroid hormones) and endorphins into the blood stream in order to protect the body and speed up the metabolism.
- Both heart rate and respiration become faster so more blood and oxygen can be pumped through the system.
- The blood thickens; fuel (in the form of cholesterol and blood sugar) is secreted.
- All senses become more acute.
- Some systems, like the digestive system, slow down because their function during an emergency is less important.

Our bodies were not built to withstand the demands of the fight-or-flight-or-freeze response for long periods. As your organ systems fatigue, you gradually develop a range of physical and mental health problems.

Armed with this understanding of how stress works, you are now ready to recognize signs of teen stress.

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