

6-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, Ann Michelle and Rasmussen, Marilyn F., "Thriving in Today's Times: Recognizing and Addressing Your Teen's Stress" (2009). *Extension Extra*. Paper 444.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra/444

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Thriving in Today's Times: Recognizing and Addressing Your Teen's Stress

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The family's emotional climate has a large impact on adolescent stress. An adolescent's emerging role as a young adult produces an acute awareness of family status. Parents need to monitor their teens if the family is suffering from extremely stressful circumstances, including economic uncertainty. When the family's financial resources are threatened, rather than being shielded from regretful information, adolescents should be involved in the family decision making.

Adolescents are often keenly aware of what is happening in society, including issues such as a poor economy, home foreclosures, and job loss. Teenagers may become fearful that these issues will affect not only the family's well-being but also their own relationships with and standing among their peers. Teenagers may, in the extreme, be fearful that they will be uprooted from their community and friends.

Even in normal, relatively unremarkable times, the adolescent years are filled with emotionally charged issues and stressful situations. Teens are vulnerable to stress from both internal and external forces. Hormonal changes during their rapid physical growth and development affect a teen's emotional well-being, and relationships with family, friends, teachers, and coaches often provide a barometer of their emotional balance. As teens strive toward independence, they may find themselves rebelling against situations that they have no control over, such as moving, parents separating or divorcing, or threats to the family's livelihood.

Normal adolescent developmental stages can be divided into three phases (American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry):

- 1) An early adolescent will
 - strive for freedom,
 - struggle with a sense of identity,
 - test limits,
 - show less affection toward parents,
 - and reject parental values.
- 2) A middle adolescent will
 - be less argumentative,
 - want to spend most of his/her time with peers,
 - complain about wanting more independence,
 - and be mostly interested in the present.
- 3) In late adolescence, teens will
 - have a stronger sense of identity,
 - have fewer conflicts with parents,
 - may become more helpful,
 - be willing to compromise,
 - be more interested in social and cultural traditions,
 - and look toward the future.

Understanding the typical development of adolescents is important for parents. Some upheaval, arguments, and even rule breaking are normal behaviors. Teenagers will test limits and parental values to learn about themselves and become more independent. However, it is important for parents to recognize the difference between typical development and an over-reaction to stress.

Stress may affect your teen to the point he or she is not functioning effectively. Monitor for these symptoms:

- severe anxiety (This may include constant worrying about events before they happen)
- social withdrawal from peers or family
- aggression or other emotional instabilities
- physical illness (headaches, stomachaches, or other chronic pain)
- change in sleep habits (sleeping too little or too much)
- poor performance in school
- low self-esteem
- an inability to cope that may lead to poor choices related to the use of drugs and alcohol

There are strategies that parents can employ to help their teens decrease the stress:

- Identify increased stress in your adolescent. Monitor the teenager's health, behaviors, and emotional stability. It is especially important to watch for overloading (e.g., too many activities and responsibilities).
- Learn, practice, and model stress-management skills for your teenager. This may include asking for help.
- Model and teach relaxation techniques to your teen. Promote regular exercise and eating patterns. Exercise helps to reduce stress and exercising with friends gives them the opportunity for social support. Try to keep family meals on schedule.
- Support their involvement in sports or other social activities. Parents need to understand the importance of peer support during a time of crisis. Remember that even in crisis teenagers need to have fun with friends. It helps teens regain control of their emotions, as well as regain some normalcy.
- Share with your teen the family's plan to reduce economic stress and the plan's probable time frame for completion.
- Involve adolescents in family decision-making and

planning processes. Involving them helps them connect with possible solutions and in turn promotes their sense of contribution and mastery.

- Teens have a need to be responsible. There is a fine balance between helping a teen feel responsible or needed and making a teen feel overwhelmed. Openly discuss with teens what they feel they can or cannot do. Communicate your belief in your teen's ability.
- Help your teen learn to develop assertiveness and communication skills. Show how to state feelings in a polite but firm way. For example, "I feel angry when you don't trust me." Suggest rehearsal for a situation that may cause stress. Practicing in front of a mirror to approach a teacher, coach, or friend about a problem will provide insight into how to respond to a stressful confrontation.

By the time youths reach adolescence they have a good understanding and comprehension of complex family issues. It is important to you and to your teen's future growth and development to recognize the part adolescents can play in the emotional, physical, and economic well-being of the family.

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Original ExEx14061 publication title (July 2002):

Farming, Ranching, and Stress: It's a Family Issue: #4: Recognizing and Addressing Your Teen's Stress



South Dakota
Cooperative Extension Service

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EXEX14061 Access at <http://agbiopubs.sdstate.edu/articles/ExEx14061.pdf> or at <http://sdces.sdstate.edu/thriving/>