

How Can Gifted Students Cope with Stress?

Some ways of coping with stress are healthy; others are not. Some healthy ways of handling stress include the following:

- Change the source of the stress. Do something else for a while. Put down those study notes and jog for an hour.
- Confront the source of the stress. If it is a person, persuade him or her to remove the stress. Ask the teacher for an extension on a project. Sit down with the person driving you crazy and talk about ways you might better work together.
- Talk about the source of stress. Rid yourself of frustration. Find a good listener and complain. Talk through possible solutions.
- Shift your perspective. Tell yourself that each new situation or problem is a new challenge, and that there is something to be learned from every experience. Try to see the humorous side of the situation.
- Learn skills and attitudes that make tasks easier and more successful. Practice effective organization and time-management skills. For example, large projects are easier and less overwhelming when broken down into manageable steps. Learn to type and revise assignments on a word processor. Learn about yourself and your priorities, and use the information to make decisions. Learn how to say "no" gracefully when someone offers you another attractive (or unpleasant) task about which you have a choice. Tell yourself that this unpleasantness will be over soon and that the whole process will bring you closer to reaching your goal. Mark the days that are left on the calendar, and enjoy crossing out each one as you near the finish.
- Aiming too low. This reduces stress by eliminating intense pressure or possible feelings of failure. Dogged procrastination in starting projects, selecting less competitive colleges or less rigorous courses, or dropping out of school rather than bringing home poor grades allows students to avoid feelings of failure in the short run. Sadly, this sets the stage for long-term disappointment caused by a destructive coping style.
- Overscheduling daily life with schoolwork and extracurricular activities, selecting impossibly demanding course loads, or fussing endlessly over assignments in vain attempts to make them perfect. With this strategy, it is possible to succeed only through superhuman effort; thus the student can save face by setting goals too high for anyone to achieve.

The following are some unhealthy ways students cope with stress:

- Escaping through alcohol, drugs, frequent illness, sleep, overeating, or starving themselves. These strategies suggest a permanent withdrawal or avoidance rather than a time out.
- Selecting strategies to avoid failure. Gifted students closely link their identities to excellence and achievement. Failure, or even the perception of failure, seriously threatens their self-esteem. By not trying, or by selecting impossible goals, students can escape having their giftedness questioned. Only their lack of effort will be questioned.

The following checklist includes many, but not all, symptoms of burnout:

Student is no longer happy or pleasantly excited about school activities, but, rather, is negative or cynical toward work, teachers, classmates, parents, and the whole school- and achievement-centered experience.

Student approaches most school assignments with resignation or resentment.

Student exhibits boredom.

Student suffers from sleeplessness, problems in falling asleep, or periodic waking.

Student overreacts to normal concerns or events.

Student experiences fatigue, extreme tiredness, low energy level.

Student exhibits unhappiness with self and accomplishments.

Student has nervous habits such as eye blinking, head shaking, or stuttering.

Student has physical ailments such as weekly or daily stomachaches or headaches.

Student is frequently ill.

Student exhibits dependency through increased clinging or needing and demanding constant support and reassurance.

Student engages in attention-getting behaviors such as aggressive or acting-out behaviors.

Student has a sense of being trapped or a feeling of being out of control.

Student is unable to make decisions.

Student has lost perspective and sense of humor.

Student experiences increased feelings of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion in work and activities that used to give pleasure.

How Can Parents, Teachers, and Counselors Reduce Stress on Gifted Students?

- Help each gifted student understand and cope with his or her intellectual, social, and emotional needs during each stage of development. In some ways, the needs of gifted students mirror those of more typical children. Giftedness, however, adds a special dimension to self-understanding and self-acceptance. If gifted youngsters are to develop into self-fulfilled adults, the following differential needs must be addressed:

- (a) the need to understand the ways in which they are different from others and the ways in which they are the same;
 - (b) the need to accept their abilities, talents, and limitations;
 - (c) the need to develop social skills;
 - (d) the need to feel understood and accepted by others; and
 - (e) the need to develop an understanding of the distinction between "pursuit of excellence" and "pursuit of perfection." VanTassel-Baska (1989) and Delisle (1988) have offered useful suggestions on how to meet these needs.
- Help each gifted student develop a realistic and accurate self-concept. Giftedness does not mean instant mastery or winning awards. Parents and teachers need to set realistic expectations for efforts and achievements and help the student choose appropriate goals. It is important to recognize and appreciate efforts and improvement.

On the other hand, giftedness permits people to learn and use information in unusual ways. Given parental support and encouragement, personal motivation, and opportunities to learn and apply their knowledge, gifted students may enjoy the process of creating new ideas, especially if they believe that it is all right to think differently than age-mates.

- Help each gifted student be a whole person. Gifted youngsters are children first and gifted second. While their learning styles may be special, they are individuals with emotions, likes and dislikes, and unique personalities. They will not wake up one day and be "not gifted." They should not feel responsible for solving world problems, nor does the world owe them tribute. It is up to each student to make life meaningful. Understanding these realistic limits to the bounty of giftedness can reduce stress on confused students.

Gifted students have strong emotions that give personal meaning to each experience. Emotions should be recognized, understood, and used as a valid basis for appropriate behaviors.