



Psych⁴Schools

For
parents:
Reduce your stress and
worry

For parents: Reduce your stress or worry



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For parents: Reduce your stress or worry



Around two-thirds of Australian parents report feeling stressed often or all the time.¹ Raising children and adolescents is hard work. It follows then that even the most resilient parent will sometimes feel overwhelmed, and react to situations in ways they are not proud of.

If you are regularly stressed and react by crying, yelling, demanding attention, or giving up, your children are likely to do the same. This is because your children watch how you cope with everything from small everyday hassles to major stressful events. They learn from you and will often copy your behaviour.



While it is difficult to stay in control all the time, the better you are at actively using strategies that help you to manage your emotions and stay calm, the more likely your children will be able to regulate their responses to worries or stressful situations. Regulating your emotions can also help prevent daily stressors from becoming overwhelming.

1. Be aware of your feelings

- **Regularly stop for a moment and pay attention to how you feel.** This is the first step to regulating your emotions. Are you feeling worried, frustrated, excited, or perhaps just a bit annoyed? Becoming more attuned to your emotions and nuances in your feelings means you are less likely to overreact, and lose your cool. When we feel very emotional (e.g. very angry, stressed, or scared) we can become overwhelmed. Saying, 'I'm feeling really annoyed' or 'I'm just a bit stressed,' helps you understand what's happening, and regain a sense of control. Try some of the following ideas:
 - **Set an alarm on your phone** to go off three times a day. Stop each time and pay attention to how you are feeling.
 - **Use the *Mood Meter app* to assist you to identify and track how you are feeling**, gain tips to change how you feel, and enhance the way you manage things. For more on using this app go to the '*Great kids*' article, 'There's an app for that feeling.'
 - **If you yell**, or are about to yell at your child or find yourself losing control, stop, take a breath, think about how you are feeling, and then use a calm speaking voice.
 - **If you often feel overwhelmed**, stressed or anxious talk to someone about how you feel, such as a partner, close friend, relative or someone you respect at your child's school. Alternatively, seek professional assistance from your doctor who can rule out health issues that may cause you to feel this way. If necessary, you can be referred to a psychologist or other mental health practitioner. Some workplaces may offer confidential employee assistance programs that enable you to access a number of free sessions with a psychologist to help explore and resolve concerns.

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2008) Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Report 2006-2007. Retrieved from <http://www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au/pubs/ar/ar200607/index.html>



2. Change your thinking to change your mood

- **Put things into perspective, when you feel overwhelmed or worried** by tuning in to your self-talk (what you think and say to yourself).

When you are stressed, your self-talk might sound like this: 'I'll never get it all done. I have too much to do.' or 'She's late. What if she's been in an accident?'

When you feel very worried, your self-talk tends to focus on negatives or the worst scenario. You may also doubt your ability to cope with whatever is happening.

- **When you feel stressed, consider whether your reaction to the situation is in proportion to what is happening.** Listen to your self-talk. Is something 'infuriating' or just 'a bit irritating'? Are you really having 'the worst day' or have a few frustrating things happened? Take several deep breaths and ask yourself one or more of these questions:



- Is this thought true? Think like a detective: What is the evidence for and against the thought?
- If you are worrying about a future event, consider the likelihood that it will happen. (0 - 100%). Then consider:
- What could I do to cope if this did happen?
- What is most likely to happen? (based on past experience, or effort put in).

For more tips see the free [Centre for Clinical Interventions Challenging Worry module](#).

- **Write a list and create an action plan.** When we worry, lots of concerns can swirl around in our minds. Listing these can help to contain them, and make problems seem more manageable. Often writing them down can be enough, but if you still feel stressed, create an action plan that focuses on solving each concern. Note what needs to be done, set a time to complete the tasks, and tick each one off as it is completed. If it all feels too hard, break a large task into small practical steps. This makes it seem less daunting and more achievable. Reducing your expectations can also help. Does it *really* have to be done today? Will anyone be harmed if it isn't? If you have trouble with this, try talking it through with a supportive friend.
- **Focus on what has gone right.** When we are stressed, worried or angry, we tend to focus on what has or could go wrong. To counter this tendency, actively focus on three good things that happened that day (even small events, such as seeing a beautiful moon). Write these in a journal, share them with someone, or make it a family activity, taking turns at the dinner table, each saying one good thing that happened that day. See [Tips on keeping a gratitude journal](#).

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3. Learn how to calm yourself

- **Practice meditation, deep breathing, or mindfulness.** These help you focus on what is happening 'here and now', rather than anxious thoughts about what could go wrong in the future. The more you practice, the better you will become at quickly calming. There are many free apps designed to help you do this, such as *Smiling Mind* or *Reachout Breathe*.
- **Take regular 10-minute walks.** Exercise is a great de-stressor. While walking, focus on simple pleasant things around you, such as, the blue sky, the sun on your face, or an interesting tree, rather than your 'to-do list' or worries.
- **Reduce rushing**, especially in the morning before school.
 - **Stop. Breathe slowly and deeply** for 10 seconds when you feel rushed or anxious.
 - **Get up 30 minutes before your children.** Use this time to get dressed, eat your breakfast, read the paper, water the garden or go for a short walk before they wake, so you can have some time to yourself at the start of the day.
 - **Prepare the night before.** For example, lay out your clothes, and your children's, complete notices and make lunches.
- **Take part in enjoyable activities with friends or by yourself.** Healthy distractions such as dinner with friends, watching a movie, cooking a good meal, or playing tennis can help to take your mind off your worries for a short period of time.
- **Improve *troubled sleep*.** Read Psych4Schools Blog, *Students who can't fall asleep at nights* and strategies from *The Sleep Health Foundation*.



4. Build your coping toolbox

- **Build up the resources that help you cope with stress.** Resources include strategies you use to regulate your emotions, physical health, spirituality, finance, meaningful relationships, social connectedness and role models.² Choose one area to strengthen, for example,
 - **Improve fitness.** Set an exercise goal for the month such as brisk walking for 30 minutes four times a week. Exercise reduces stress. Being fit will give you more stamina, enabling you to better manage physical and mental health.
 - **Invest in friendships.** Aim to speak with friends or see them face-to-face more often. Set a goal to call or see at least two friends every week for a month.
 - **Build emotional control.** Practice stopping. Find calm. Think big picture. Put things into perspective.

² Payne, R.K., DeVol, P., Smith, T. D., (2001) Bridges out of poverty, Strategies for professionals and communities. (Revised edition). Aha! Process, Inc. Highlands, USA, See www.ahaprocess.com

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- **Use proactive coping strategies.** What do you normally do when something worries you or goes wrong? What is your default reaction? Are you likely to be proactive and work at solving the problem, or do you bury your head in the sand hoping it will go away, or get upset, yell or blame others? The good news is you *can* change the way you react. Review a list of coping strategies such as those recommended by *Blake Flannery*, or *Reach Out* for ideas of proactive responses. You can also use the lists to review any negative strategies you use, and consider replacing them with more helpful ones.

Proactive coping strategies help you feel better and solve problems without harming yourself or others. Examples include deep breathing, talking to a friend, reading, watching a movie, working 'smarter', exercising, using humour, or relaxation techniques.

Negative coping strategies may help you feel better in the short-term, but can harm your mental health and wellbeing in the long term. They typically don't solve the issue. Examples include ignoring or avoiding the problem, using drugs or alcohol, eating to excess, yelling, or using violence.

- **Develop a self-care card.** List four or more things you can do to reduce stress or worry. Make one for home and one for work, and keep them in an accessible place such as on your phone, computer or bathroom mirror. Make changes as you find others that work better. Use the strategies regularly to prevent daily stressors becoming overwhelming

WHEN I GET HOME

- Turn phone and computer off and spend 30 minutes with partner or children.
- Practice calm breathing.
- Go for a 20-minute walk in the park.
- Call Sarah for a talk.
- Go to yoga on Wed. night.

AT WORK

- Focus on breathing for 5 breaths.
- One coffee only.
- Stretch arms and legs.
- Go for a short walk at lunchtime.
- Talk with Nick, Anna or Lucy.
- Squeeze my stress ball.

5. Help your child with stress and worry

- **Show (not just tell) your child how you cope with problems**, by letting them see you working out a solution to a problem, or calming down and relaxing before 'having-a go'. When appropriate, talk your child through what it is like for you, and how you cope using proactive strategies such as deep breathing. For examples of ways adults can assist children with stress and worry, see Psych4Schools, *For parents: Assist your child with stress and worry* available from Psych4Schools, your Psych4Schools school or teacher subscriber.

For immediate help or information: Call **Lifeline** 131 114, or visit beyondblue.org.au



Resources

- Australasian Sleep Association (2015) Tips and facts about sleep – The Sleep Health Foundation
<http://www.sleep.org.au/information/consumer-information/tips-and-facts-about-sleep>
- Centre for Clinical Interventions (2015). What? Me Worry!?! Model 2: Overview of Worrying. Updated 16 June.
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<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/reachout-breathe/id985891649?mt=8>
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