

# STRESS & ANXIETY

Do you ever feel like it's you vs. your emotions? If you do, you're not alone. Everyone experiences stress sometimes, and **1 in 10 teens** today live with anxiety.

That doesn't mean that kids these days are doomed — anxiety *can* get better over time. The following pages are packed with information about stress and anxiety, coping strategies for dealing with both, and resources where you can learn more.

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health has been a hot-button topic lately, so let's review the facts to make sure we're all on the same page.

**Mental health** is a general state of well-being that enables us to cope with life's ups and downs. Strong mental health helps us realize our abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to our communities.

## MENTAL HEALTH: MYTH VS. REALITY

### MYTH

"Mental health" and "mental illness" are the same thing.

People with mental illnesses are dangerous.

Asking for help with mental health is a sign of weakness.

It's easy to tell when someone is struggling with a mental illness.

### REALITY

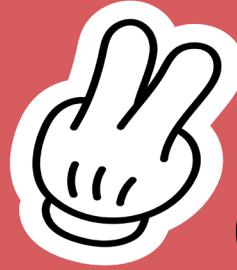
"Mental health" refers to a person's overall emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It's a part of everyone's life, whether they feel good or bad.

"Mental illness" is a broad term for a group of conditions that require a professional diagnosis. A mental illness can limit a person's ability to function, so it's important for a person with a mental illness to get help. Unlike mental health, not everyone has a mental illness.

Most people with mental illnesses are not violent or dangerous. Stereotyping people with mental illness can lead to stigma and discourage them from getting support.

Reaching out for help takes strength and courage. Everyone needs support sometimes.

Mental illness doesn't have a "look," and lots of people hide their struggles. That's why checking in on your friends and taking mental health seriously is important.



# WHAT'S A COPING STRATEGY?

You saw the words “coping strategies” in the introduction, and you’ll see them a lot more over the next sixty or so pages. But what exactly is a coping strategy? How does it work? Basically, a **coping strategy** is a method a person uses to manage stress and difficult situations.

There are two categories of coping strategies: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.



A **problem-focused** coping strategy involves actively addressing the source of your stress. For example, if you’re stressed about an upcoming test, you could study extra hard so that you feel ready to tackle the exam when the time comes.



An **emotion-focused** coping strategy aims to regulate the emotions you feel during times of stress. Keeping with the test example, an emotion-based coping strategy might mean journaling about why you’re stressed. Are you worried about grades? College? Letting yourself down? Naming these feelings can help you tame them.

The coping strategies in this book are mostly emotion-focused strategies, such as breathing exercises and journaling activities. Some might feel a little funny at first, but give them a shot anyway — it never hurts to try! You might be surprised at what works for your unique brain.

# NAME IT TO TAME IT



While stress and anxiety can feel similar, they are different things. Understanding the differences between them can help you choose the right coping strategy to deal with how you're feeling.

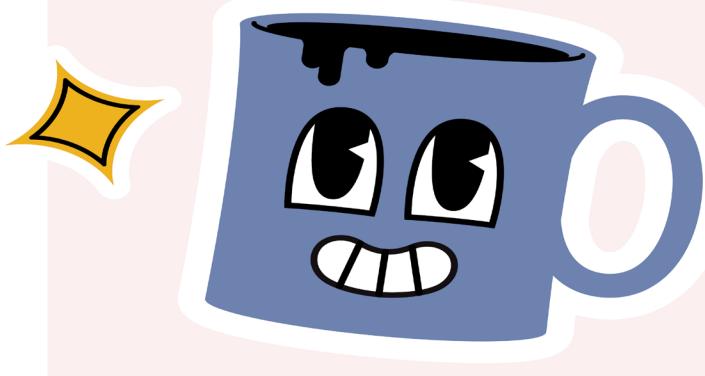
## STRESS

**Stress** is when you feel worried or uncomfortable about a specific thing for a short time. Your body releases hormones to make you alert and ready to act.

Stress fades away after the thing you were stressed about is over.

### It can feel like...

- A headache
- An upset stomach
- Tense muscles



## ANXIETY

**Anxiety** is a fear or dread that does not go away when the stressor is absent.

While everyone feels anxious sometimes, “anxiety” is a specific medical diagnosis. Anxiety often requires treatment, usually in the form of therapy or medication.

### It can lead to...

- Avoiding people, places, tasks, and feelings
- Difficulty managing worry, or feeling like your worries are spiraling out of control
- Frequent headaches/illnesses
- Inability to focus
- Irritability

# NAME IT TO TAME IT

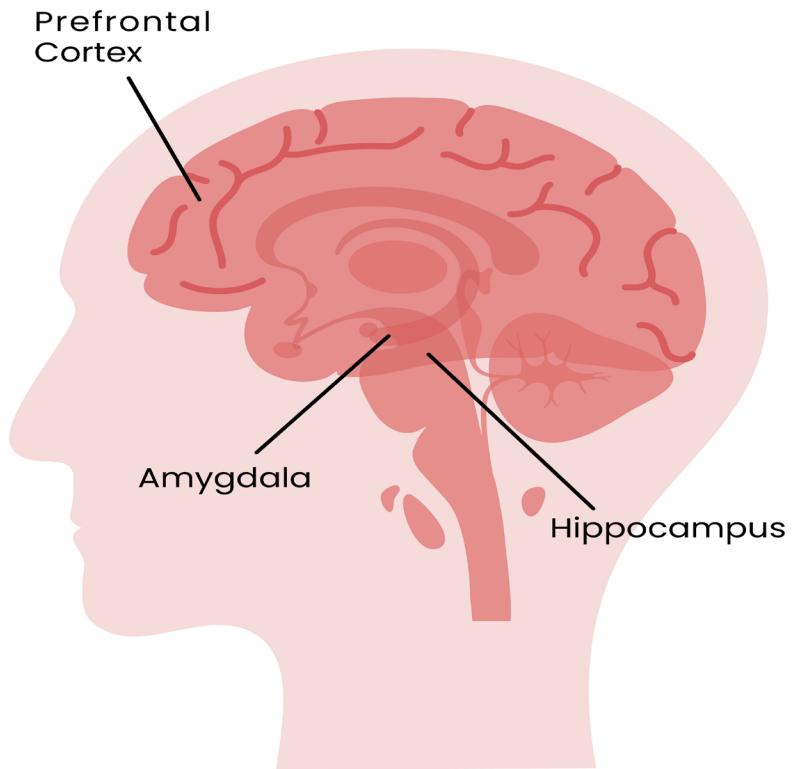
Want to learn more about how stress actually works inside the brain?

There are a few key areas of your brain that help handle stress.

## AMYGDALA

Your amygdala works like a fire alarm. Its job is to alert you to danger, but like a fire alarm, it can't tell the difference between real danger and not-real danger.

When the amygdala takes over, it limits the prefrontal cortex's ability to function. Since your brain is focusing all of its energy on surviving, prefrontal processes like communication and logical reasoning decline. If you've ever noticed that it's hard to think clearly during times of extreme stress, that was your amygdala working.



## PREFRONTAL CORTEX

The prefrontal cortex is your brain's control center and filter all in one. It helps you process complex information, make tough decisions, and regulate your attention to focus on things that matter.

## HIPPOCAMPUS

The hippocampus helps us pump the brakes on our emotions and sends signals to the prefrontal cortex to help us return to normal brain functioning.

Whenever you encounter a high-stress situation, your body's first step is to calm the amygdala and get the front brain working again.

# ANXIETY-FIGHTING ACTIVITIES

Shifting your mindset can calm feelings of anxiety. The next time you are feeling anxious, try one of these comforting activities:

Text or call a trusted friend

Go outside

Journal your feelings

Try a breathing exercise

Move your body

Take a social media break

Listen to your favorite music

Speak kindly to yourself

Get cozy

# WHAT TO DO IF ANXIETY TAKES OVER

Anxiety-fighting activities can make you feel better in the moment, but they're not always enough. If anxiety takes over your school, home, or social life, it might be time to talk to a therapist. Therapy can be intimidating, but it can also make a big difference in helping you feel better in the long run.

## WHAT TO EXPECT AT A FIRST THERAPY APPOINTMENT

At your first therapy session, you and your therapist will likely spend some time getting to know each other. You'll introduce yourselves, talk about your concerns, and start to set some goals for addressing those concerns.

**If you're still feeling anxious about your first appointment or going to therapy in general, you can manage that anxiety with a few strategies.**

- 1 Prepare questions:** Jot down anything you're curious about so you feel more confident going in.
- 2 Practice mindfulness:** To calm your nerves, take a few deep breaths or try a meditation exercise before your session.
- 3 Know that it's okay to be nervous:** Try focusing on a sense of accomplishment — you're doing something really brave by taking care of yourself! You should also know that your therapist understands your nerves. They will understand if you're feeling a bit stressed, and they're there to help.

## A FEW LAST REMINDERS:

- It's ok to tell your therapist you feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics if you don't feel ready.
- It's ok to tell them preferences for activities, especially ones you don't like or don't think are helpful.

- It's ok to ask about confidentiality: What will they share? Who will they share it with?
- It's ok to ask for a new therapist altogether — you might not click with the first person you meet with, but that doesn't mean you should give up!

# MY THOUGHTS MATTER

Free your mind and let the truth flow. Write down (or draw!) your answers to the following questions, and remember: There are no wrong answers.

**What causes you stress or anxiety?**

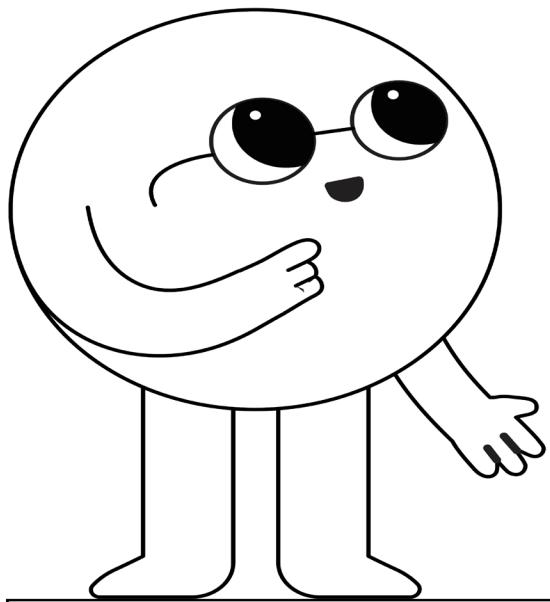
**What physical sensations do you feel when you feel stressed or anxious?**

**Who have you talked to about your stress or anxiety? If you haven't talked to anyone, why not?**

# MY THOUGHTS MATTER

**Write down all the “clutter” in your head.**

*“Clutter” is all the stuff that sticks around in the back of your mind and makes you feel stressed or anxious when you think about it.*



**Pick a piece of clutter from above. What steps can you take to address the stress and anxiety?**

# BUILD THE TENSION, THEN LET IT GO

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)** is a popular technique for reducing anxiety and stress that anyone can try.

When you feel anxious or stressed, you might tense your muscles without even realizing it. Practicing PMR can help your body recognize tension and release unnecessary stress.

## HERE'S HOW TO DO IT:

- 1 Get cozy:** Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed, and sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- 2 Breathe deep:** Take a few slow, deep breaths to get into a calmer mindset.
- 3 Tense and relax different muscle groups:** As you tense and release your muscles, pay attention to how it feels to relax your body.
  - Toes: Curl your toes down as tightly as you can for 5–10 seconds. Release.
  - Feet: Flex your ankles up for 5–10 seconds. Release.
  - Legs: Squeeze your legs together and tighten your thigh muscles for 5–10 seconds. Release.
  - Abs: Create tension in your abs and hold for 5–10 seconds. Release.
  - Chest: Tighten your chest muscles by taking a deep breath in and holding it for 5–10 seconds. Breathe out slowly to release.
  - Shoulders: Draw your shoulders up to your ears and hold them there for 10 seconds. Release.
  - Arms: Clench your fists and flex your biceps for 5–10 seconds. Release.
  - Face: Squeeze your eyes shut and purse your lips for 5–10 seconds. You might look or feel a little silly, and that's okay. Release.
- 4 Focus on the feeling:** When you're done, take a moment to reflect, relax, and enjoy feeling a little more at ease.

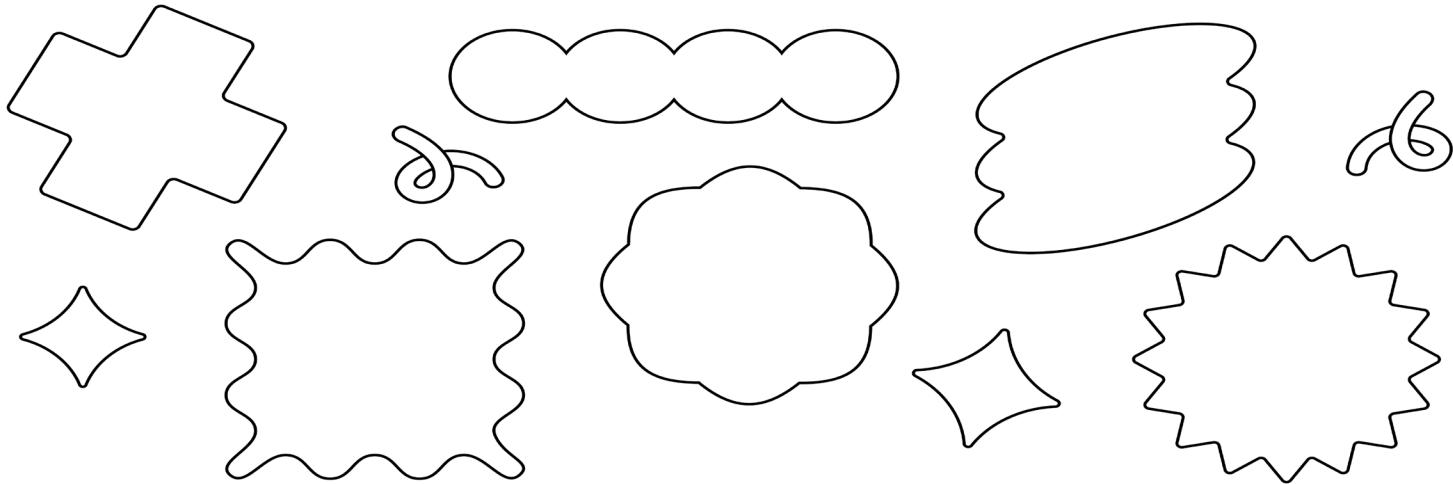
# BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

GOOD VIBES

Trace the shapes below with your finger. The first time, breathe in. The second time, breathe out. Repeat as needed to find your calm.

## BONUS

Try tracing these same shapes on your palm or leg the next time you feel nervous. What's the difference between tracing on a piece of paper and tracing on your body?



## HOW CAN BREATHING EXERCISES HELP?

A group of nerves around our diaphragm is connected to the hippocampus, which is why deep breathing can help stimulate this area of the brain and help us calm down.

Think of stress as the gas pedal in a car — it might make your heart beat faster or make you feel like your mind is going a million miles a minute.

Taking deep breaths can turn on your “brakes.” Sometimes it takes a little while for your brakes to turn on, and that’s okay. Doing a breathing exercise probably won’t fully take your emotions away, but it might help your mind slow down.

# WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP.

If stress or anxiety affects your daily life, please talk to someone you trust.

In a crisis? The 988 Lifeline is here to support you 24/7. Connect with a trained, caring counselor anytime by texting or calling 988, or chatting online at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).

Remember: You can also text, call, or chat with the Lifeline for another person. If a friend or family member is experiencing a mental health crisis, other people can help you help them.

**SCAN THIS QR CODE TO EXPLORE  
EXPERT-BACKED RESOURCES ON  
STRESS AND ANXIETY.**

