

# Stress Management to Help Teens Cope

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By Julie Mitchell  
*Mindfulness, Meditation, and Guided Visualization Enter the Classroom*

Elliott O., a high school senior at the Maharishi School in Iowa, is a regular kid, affected by peer pressure, grades, and meeting parental expectations. But unlike some frazzled teens who react to stress by acting out or even drinking or using drugs, Elliott meditates twice daily. Although stress makes many adolescents anxious, angry or depressed, Elliott has developed skills to get himself through tough times, and through meditation, his stress at school has virtually evaporated.

“You can do it anywhere,” he says, “And through meditation you can learn to relax and get in touch with yourself.”

## Schools Teaching Students to Relax

Many high schools and colleges are taking a proactive approach to student stress. Marilyn Wilcher, senior director of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, has been working for nearly a decade to teach students coping techniques such as deep

breathing and visualizing their goals during class.

“We’ve found that when teens experience undue stress,” says Wilcher, “they start exhibiting unhealthy behavior. We teach relaxation responses, the importance of exercise and nutrition, and especially, awareness of thoughts and behaviors that are caused by stress and how to stop thinking negatively.” The Benson-Henry Institute has found that students exposed to a relaxation-response-based curriculum earn high grade point averages, have increased self-esteem, less aggressive behavior, and better study habits and attendance.

Will F., a participant in the stress management workshops at Needham High School near Boston, says he has found the exercises to be extremely helpful in reducing stress. “Personally, I find deep breathing exercises particularly relaxing and convenient as I can do them anywhere,” Will says. “Benson-Henry’s explanation of ‘being in the moment’ has also helped to de-stress me as I used to always think about the test I was going to take or the homework I had instead of enjoying being where I am at an exact moment.”



## How Parents Can Help De-Stress Teens

- Spend more time with your child, giving him or her plenty of time to talk about worries or pressure.
- Eat dinner as a family as many nights a week as possible, and have other rituals you stick to on an ongoing basis.
- Try to make sure your teen is eating and sleeping well. Insist on a reasonable weeknight bedtime.
- Start a family practice using ways to relax, such as meditation, mindful breathing, visual imagery, massage, and keeping a journal or listening to quiet music.

## What Teens Can Do to Reduce Stress

- Try not to let yourself get overscheduled. If you feel overwhelmed, consider cutting out at least one activity per week.
- Set realistic goals. No one is perfect. Strive to do your best at school and at home, and ask for help if you need it.
- Take care of your body. Eat a variety of foods, get to bed on time, and work on ways to relax.

## Understanding What Stress Means

Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory high school counselor, Christine Leendersten, explains her San Francisco school's stress reduction curriculum.

"First we work with the students to define what stress means to them," she says, "and how it affects them mentally, physically, and socially. For some kids, it's family pressures, for others it's homework, and others are worried most about relationships.

"We've found that if an individual can identify what's stressing him or her, and their

reaction – from lashing out at parents and friends, or an inability to concentrate – we can teach the student how to deal with it. Some of the words students use after learning guided imagery meditation are 'relaxing' and 'peaceful.' "

Leendersten has freshmen keep stress logs and then teaches them a 10-minute meditation using guided imagery so that they use this technique to calm themselves any time they feel stress during the day.

## Quiet on Campus

Some schools use transcendental meditation or TM®, developed 50 years ago by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for all students, faculty, and staff at the beginning and

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end of every school day. Other schools are establishing a silent period twice a day where students sit to rest or read.

Daniel M., a student at the University of the District of Columbia, says: "Since I started doing TM I'm sick much less. I used to get headaches all the time, but I have only had two headaches the entire semester, and my attention span has improved, and studying is easier."

The control that students can achieve by learning to be in the moment is something they will value for the rest of their lives. Maybe parents should take a chill pill and relax when their teens do!

## Additional Resources

### Web sites

- The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, [www.mbmi.org]
- Quiet Time in the Classroom, National Summit on Children's Health and Education, [www.stressfreesummit.org]
- David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, [www.davidlynchfoundation.org]
- Mindful Awareness Research Center, UCLA, [www.marc.ucla.edu]

### Books

- "Too Stressed to Think?: A Teen Guide to Staying Sane When Life Makes You Crazy" (Paperback) by Annie Fox (Free Spirit; \$14.95; 163 pages)
- "Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond" (Paperback) by Marilee Jones and Kenneth R. Ginsburg (America Academy of Pediatrics; \$14.95, 250 pages)
- "Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students" (Paperback) by Denise Clark Pope (Yale University Press; \$13.95, 240 pages)

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