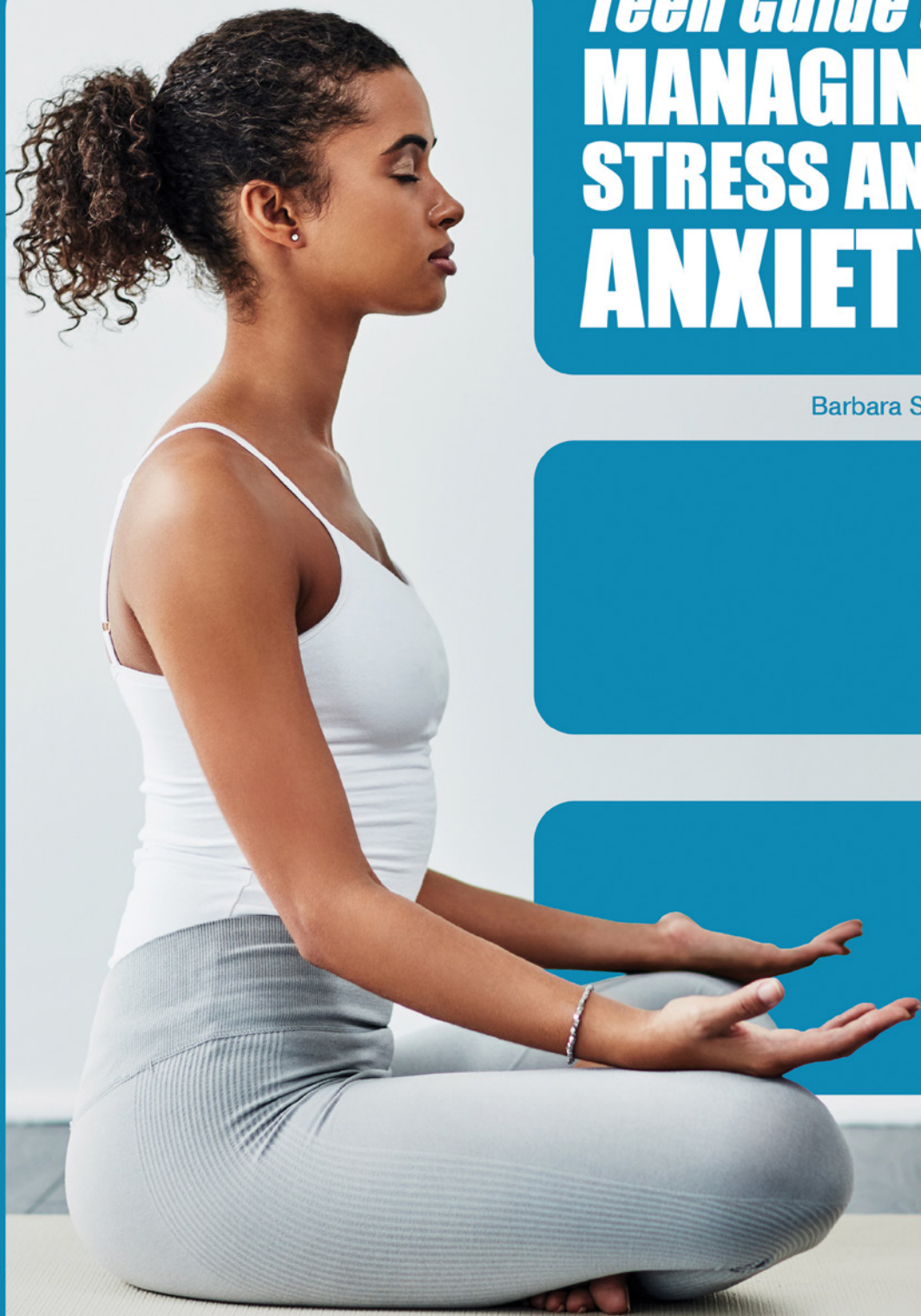


Teen Guide to **MANAGING STRESS AND ANXIETY**

Barbara Sheen





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Not Just an Emotional Issue

Sixteen-year-old Sonya was frantically struggling to complete an assignment in biology class when she started feeling strange. “My face got really hot, and my whole body felt paralyzed,” she recalls. “It seemed like the walls were closing in on me.”³

Sonya did not know what was happening. She was very frightened and went to the school counselor for help. She learned that she’d had a panic attack and that her symptoms were caused by overwhelming anxiety. She also learned that lots of teens were experiencing these feelings.

Since that time, Sonya has learned a lot about stress and anxiety, as well as how to cope with the problems they can cause. Learning about stress and anxiety, their effects on the body, and what specific events triggers stress in you personally are important steps in managing your response. As Karen Young, an Australian psychologist and author of the website Hey Sigmund, explains:

Understanding why anxiety feels the way it does will be one of your greatest tools in managing it. Think of it like this. Imagine being in a dark room that is full of “stuff.” When you walk around in the dark,

you're going to bump into things. You're going to scrape, bruise and maybe drop a few choice words. Turn on the light though, and those things are still there, but now you can navigate your way around them. No more bumps. No more scrapes.⁴

What Is Stress?

Stress is the body's physical, emotional, and mental reaction to a perceived threat. Such threats are known as triggers or stressors. Most stressors are related to specific events and demands in our lives that seem difficult to cope with. Stress can be mild, moderate, or severe and can be beneficial or harmful, depending on the amount of stress and the circumstances. Feeling stressed before competing in a race, trying out for a team, or taking a big test, for example, can be beneficial. The physiological effect stress has on the body makes you feel stronger, more alert, and more energetic, which can enhance your performance. Nebraska school psychologist Diane Marti explains that when you are stressed, "your nervous system clicks on like a button, and boom! Your heart starts pumping faster and you get a burst of energy that helps you get things done."⁵

Normally, the physiological effects of stress are short term. When that big test or other stressful event is over, you put it out of your thoughts and your body relaxes. However, if you are being bombarded by multiple stressors, or you are dealing with a persistent stressor such as being bullied or a seriously ill loved one, your body does not get a chance to relax. As a result, you feel overpowered by stress. This is known as stress overload.

Long-Term Stress Overload

When stress overload continues for at least six weeks, it can develop into anxiety. Anxiety is a chronic condition categorized by

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—Karen Young, psychologist
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Sigmund

out-of-control fear and worry, even when there is no identifiable reason for these feelings. Anxiety makes you feel nervous and panicky. It can interfere with your day-to-day life and lower your self-esteem. When anxiety takes over, it is not unusual for individuals to doubt themselves, procrastinate, avoid people or social events, and have problems making decisions.

Persistent worry about what might happen in the future and how your actions will affect the future are typical symptoms of anxiety. This fear can put your mind into an anxiety loop of what-ifs that can be emotionally paralyzing. Singer-songwriter Julia Michaels, as an example, started having problems with anxiety when she was eighteen.

I'd just signed my first publishing deal, and I felt so much pressure to perform that it sent my mind and body down something that felt like a never-ending spiral. . . . I became afraid of everything. Going out. Eating. Driving. Writing. My life became a string of what-ifs. What if I eat this and I'm allergic to it? What if I'm driving and get in an accident? What happens if I stop moving? I became consumed. I didn't know who I was anymore. I had completely isolated myself—even from the things I loved.⁶

Panic attacks, which are frightening episodes that occur suddenly and without warning, are also caused by anxiety. A panic attack feels similar to a heart attack. During a panic attack, individuals sweat and shake, have difficulty breathing, feel dizzy, or feel like they are choking, among other alarming symptoms.

On average, panic attacks last about ten minutes and typically occur only a few times in a person's lifetime. Frequent panic attacks are a symptom of a panic disorder. A panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are mental conditions. There are many kinds of anxiety disorders. Each has specific symptoms, but all cause persistent and intense anxiety. Anxiety disorders include but are not limited to panic disorder; generalized



Panic attacks occur suddenly and without warning, and have symptoms such as difficulty breathing, dizziness, and choking sensations.

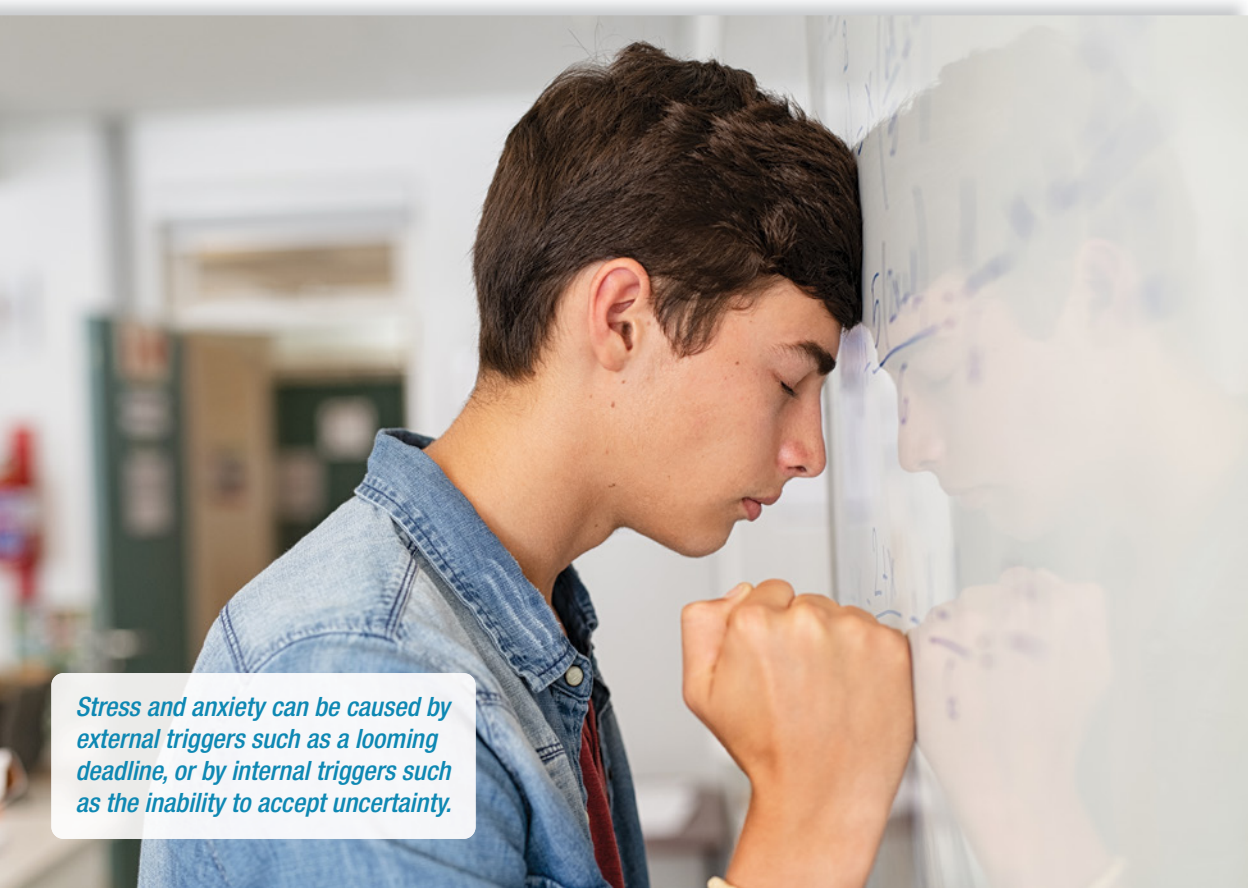
anxiety disorder, which is characterized by excessive worry about almost everything; and social anxiety disorder, which is characterized by fear and worry related to social situations. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, a condition in which people are plagued by unwanted thoughts and perform compulsive acts in an effort to quell these thoughts, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are other anxiety disorders. The causes of anxiety disorders are not totally understood. Research suggests anxiety disorders are caused by a combination of genetics, brain chemistry, and traumatic events. Excess anxiety may also be involved in the development of an anxiety disorder, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Fight or Flight

When people are very stressed or anxious, they feel jittery and nervous. Their heart beats faster, their breathing becomes rapid and shallow, their mouth becomes dry, and they feel like they have butterflies in their stomach. This is because stress and anxiety have a strong physiological effect on the body. They activate

a primitive response known as the fight-or-flight response or the acute stress response, which puts the body on high alert so that it can respond to a perceived threat. This response protected early humans from real dangers like an attack by a wild animal but is not as helpful in dealing with modern stressors like misplacing your keys. The problem is, your body responds in the same way to either event.

The fight-or-flight response begins in the brain. When the amygdala, a part of the brain that regulates emotions, identifies a threat, it immediately sets off an alarm. It signals the body to release adrenaline, cortisol, and other stress hormones that prepare the body for action. As a result, your heart rate, blood pressure, and blood sugar level increase, which gives you extra energy but also makes you feel on edge. At the same time, oxygen and blood are diverted from your extremities and sent to the muscles and vital organs. While this gives you added strength, it can also cause you to feel dizzy. In addition, your digestion slows and stomach



Stress and anxiety can be caused by external triggers such as a looming deadline, or by internal triggers such as the inability to accept uncertainty.

acids are released, giving you indigestion. And to keep your body from overheating, you sweat. Besides these physical responses, as stress hormones course through the brain, they cause mental changes, which make you feel confused, affect your ability to make decisions, or make you freeze up with inaction.

The fight-or-flight response can save your life if you are being attacked, but it is an over-the-top reaction to stress caused by a pop quiz or something you saw on social media. And if you do not understand what is happening to you, it can be quite frightening. “The thing is,” explains Catherine M. Pittman, a psychologist and professor of psychology at Saint Mary’s College in Indiana, “your amygdala can’t distinguish between an immediate danger (like having a gun pointed at you) and perceived danger (like knowing the world is full of forces that threaten your safety)—it activates the same responses either way.”⁷

Moreover, even thinking about a stressful event can activate the response, as can watching a scary movie. Plus, if you are dealing with multiple or long-term stressors, it can be difficult to shut the response down. Consequently, your body does not get a chance to rest and recuperate. Remaining in a heightened state of alert causes stress hormones to build up and puts the body out of balance. This can make you feel even more stressed and negatively affect your physical and mental health. In fact, over time, it lessens your body’s ability to fight off infection.

“Your amygdala can’t distinguish between an immediate danger (like having a gun pointed at you) and perceived danger (like knowing the world is full of forces that threaten your safety)—it activates the same responses either way.”⁷

—Catherine M. Pittman,
psychologist and professor
of psychology at Saint Mary’s
College

Internal and External Stressors

Stress and anxiety are brought on by external and internal triggers or stressors. External stressors are rooted in external events such as cyberbullying, a looming deadline, or a news report. Internal

Social Media Can Be a Stressor

Although spending time on social media can be fun, it can also trigger stress. According to an article on the website Verywell Family:

Teens often feel emotionally invested in their social media accounts. Not only do they feel pressure to respond quickly online, but they also feel pressure to have perfect photos and well-written posts, all of which can cause a great deal of anxiety. In fact, some studies have found that the larger a teen's social circle online the more anxiety they feel about keeping up with everything online. Additionally, if teens commit a faux pas online, this also can be an extreme source of anxiety. Many teens, especially girls, are prone to worry about what others might think of them and how they will respond when they see them next. Then factor in cyberbullying, slut-shaming, and other mean online behaviors and you can see why social media is a very real source of anxiety for many teens.

Therefore, if you identify social media as one of your stressors, limiting the time you spend on social media can help you manage your feelings.

Sherry Gordon, "5 Ways Social Media Affects Teen Mental Health," Verywell Family, July 13, 2020. www.verywellfamily.com.

stressors are rooted in stress-inducing thoughts or behaviors. The need to be perfect, the inability to accept uncertainty or lack of control, and various fears like fear of flying or public speaking are just a few examples of internal stressors. Both internal and external stressors can be positive or negative. Being criticized on social media, an argument with your parents, responsibilities at home, or ending a romantic relationship are examples of negative stressors. Getting married, starting a new job or new school, or learning something new, among other things, are positive stressors. Whether internal or external, positive or negative, all stressors can evoke the fight-or-flight response.

Stress triggers are also very personal and subjective. What causes you to feel stressed may have little or no effect on your best friend. Attending a social event where you are surrounded by strangers may send you into full panic mode, for instance, but have no impact on your more outgoing pal. Similarly, everyone

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WHERE TO GET HELP

Hotlines and Call Centers

Boys Town National Hotline

www.boystown.org

Boys Town is an organization that provides health services to youths and families. Counselors offer 24/7 crisis intervention and short-term counseling. Referrals to community resources are offered. Call toll-free (800) 448-3000 or text: VOICE to 20121.

Crisis Text Line

www.crisistextline.org

The Crisis Text Line provides text-based counseling for mental health issues, including anxiety, stress, and depression. Text: HOME to 741741.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a network of crisis centers that offers 24/7 counseling and emotional support to people in any type of emotional distress. Counselors can be reached via telephone or through online chat on the website. Call toll-free (800) 273-8255.

Teen Line

<https://teenlineonline.org/>

Teen Line is a California-based group that provides free peer-based emotional support to teens throughout the United States from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. It can be reached via telephone, text, and email. A message board on the website allows users to hold discussions and ask questions. Call toll-free (800) 852-8336 or text: TEEN to 839863.

ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

www.aacap.org

The AACAP is an organization dedicated to educating the public about mental health issues affecting young people. A search on the website yields lots of information about managing anxiety and anxiety disorders.

American Institute of Stress

www.stress.org

The American Institute of Stress aims to help people learn about stress and how to manage it. It offers many articles, free magazines, and a blog, among other information.

Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)

www.adaa.org

The ADAA is an organization committed to helping people with anxiety, anxiety disorders, and depression. It offers information about anxiety, tips on how to manage stress and anxiety, and online support groups. It also helps people locate mental health professionals and mental health apps.

Child Mind Institute

www.childmind.org

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to improving the mental health of children and adolescents. It provides a variety of articles and information about anxiety on its website, including information about anxiety and the coronavirus.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

Jodi Aman, *Anxiety . . . I'm So Done with You: A Teen's Guide to Ditching Toxic Stress and Hardwiring Your Brain for Happiness*. New York: Skyhorse, 2020.

Tammy Gagne, *Teens and Anxiety*. San Diego: Reference-Point Press, 2021.

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