

# For Review Only

What causes stress in children? Can stress have a great impact on their ability to function and develop normally? How do children express that they are overwhelmed? What can parents do to help them?

Signs of stress in children are often misinterpreted by adults as children are not always able to verbalise what they feel. Instead, they resort to other modes and means, sometimes unconsciously, to draw attention to themselves and their troubles.

*Living with Stress* is a valuable resource for helping parents recognise the symptoms of stress in their children. Parents will also be introduced to a range of resources and techniques they can employ in safeguarding their children's physical and mental well-being.

Revised and updated, *Living with Stress* is part of a series of handbooks on mental health in children written by mental health professionals from the Child Guidance Clinic.

Other titles in the series are:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
  - Anger
  - Autism
- Discipline Issues
- Divorce and Family Issues
  - Grief
- Intelligence and Learning Difficulties
  - Self-harm Behaviours
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*Living with* STRESS

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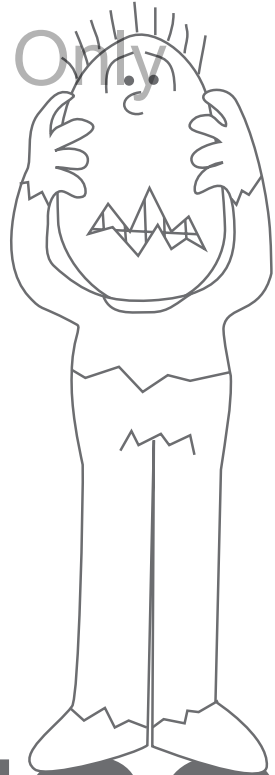
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**Dedicated to  
all the children of the Child Guidance Clinic  
and their parents**

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## PREFACE

Singapore's main resource is its people. It is inevitable, therefore, that in such a society, there is competition and pressure to excel. This often translates into an environment that produces stress, and this is an issue that has to be addressed if it constantly arises. Too much stress may lead to under-performance, thereby depriving individuals of opportunities and denying the country of a potential source of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

In the 2011 Singapore Youth Resilience Survey conducted by Beyond Social Services, 55% of the 1,941 respondents cited school as a source of stress, followed by parents (28%), peer pressure (24%), personal relationships (23%), loneliness (23%) and money (23%).

The obvious thing to do is to blame society and the 'system' we live in. We often feel disempowered and disillusioned as we imagine that there is little or nothing we can do in view of the fact that this system has already been put in place. We feel that we have no choice but to join the rat race and compete, and this often leads to low morale and a sense of despair. It may be true that as individuals, we have little power to change the system per se. Yet, it is often how we deal with and react to the system that gives us the ability to change our perceptions and cope with the demands of society.

Our children are also not spared from stress. Early in life, they are told about the need to excel, and they have to face various significant tests and examinations. Pressure or stress may come from various sources. Children may feel pressure from within themselves, from parents, from teachers as well as from peers. Children must learn to respond to and adapt to these different forms of stress. We must bear in mind that while small amounts of stress may actually be beneficial and result in increased performance, excessive stress may lead to poor performance and even mental breakdown.

**Dr Nelson Lee**  
**Dr Ong Say How**  
July 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Some children internalise stress and express it through sadness, depression or by withdrawing from company. Other children may express feelings of stress outwardly in the form of misbehaviour. How can we help our children cope with the competitive environment they live in?

This book focuses on the ways in which parents and children can learn to make stress a healthy part of their lives. It also attempts to help parents and caregivers understand and identify the different types of stress that children today face, and differentiate between good and bad forms of stress. Parents are also advised on different activities that they can engage in with their children to help alleviate symptoms of stress.

Often, a child may appear mature and able to handle responsibility; he may even seem like a 'miniature adult'. Parents may, inadvertently, add to the stress a child feels by expecting him to behave as an adult too early in life. Parents should consider, perhaps, that their child has been given too many responsibilities at too tender an age, and may be getting pushed too hard to perform, excel and grow up.

Parents, teachers and other caregivers have the important responsibility of guiding children along the path to maturity. Helping children deal positively with stressful situations allows for healthy emotional and social development as well as the inculcation of life-long skills.

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## UNDERSTANDING STRESS

### PART

# 1

Stress may be defined as a reaction to challenges and events that disturb or threaten us. It may also be seen as the body's reaction to a physical or emotional situation that causes imbalance in our lives. A person under stress experiences an increase in heart rate. He also breathes faster and his muscles tense up.

### **1.1 IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE TOTALLY FREE OF STRESS?**

Occasional stress is normal and often predictable. Normal stress presents us with challenges for greater learning and provides opportunities for personal growth. One example is the small amount of stress we may experience before meeting new people. This may prompt us to present ourselves well and to also take an interest in the other person. On the other hand, constant or excessive levels of stress can cause significant problems. Stress can be cumulative and unless it is properly handled, it can add up and provoke maladaptive responses; mental balance may be affected if we then experience additional stress from a new situation.

### **1.2 HOW DO CHILDREN RESPOND TO STRESS?**

Children react to stress in different ways. Some children fall ill. Some may become withdrawn and nervous, while others display signs of anger and demand attention. In some instances, when stress is prolonged, a child's development may be affected.

Stress can come about when a life event or situation causes imbalance in a child's life. An unhealthy response to stress occurs when the demands of the stressor (a factor that causes stress) exceed the child's ability to cope with it.

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## WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

PART

2

Parents and caregivers need to be aware of the events in a child's life that may affect his behaviour. They should discuss events that take place in the home, especially when the child starts behaving out of character.

### 2.1 WHAT CAUSES STRESS IN CHILDREN?

Stress can be caused by both negative and positive events. Some of the negative situations at home that serve as sources of stress to children include:

- the break-up of a family,
- physical abuse,
- separated or divorced parents,
- rejection and quarrels,
- a parent losing a job,
- death of a family member.

Positive events that can cause stress in children include birthday parties, new pets and the arrival of a new sibling. Even everyday family obligations, events, and routines can create stress and tension for a young child, as an active family may be so busy that it overlooks the child's needs.

### 2.2 HOW MAY STRESS IN CHILDREN BE CLASSIFIED?

Stress may be caused by a number of factors. In children, however, the causes of and responses to stress can be divided into two broad categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

#### Personal characteristics

The first category includes the personal characteristics or temperament of the child, together with his ability to cope. Some children are more sensitive than others and even small matters tend to bother them a lot, causing them to fret and worry excessively. These children are more susceptible to stress whereas others appear to be more resilient and seemingly unaffected by stress.

More resilient children tend to bounce back from a threat or setback after only a very short period of recovery. They are able to adapt to changes quickly and then immediately carry on with their lives. Even then, many children have difficulty in understanding how to cope with stress.

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Parents should remember that regardless of a child's temperament or personality, he may be taught efficient ways of coping with stress.

## Events surrounding a child

The second category includes the events that directly affect a child, or indirectly affect his family and friends. Personal histories can also make a difference. A child's coping resources may be pushed to the limit if he has:

- been sick for a long period of time,
- frequently moved from one living space to another,
- had to deal with major issues in the family, such as divorce or death of a loved one.

In these situations, children need special attention or help in dealing with new stressors even if they appear to be coping well. Parents must be mindful of changes in the environment or perceived threats to the child. This is because children who have already been significantly stressed may be pushed over the threshold of mental balance when a new stressor is introduced.

## 2.3 HOW DOES A CHILD'S AGE AFFECT HOW HE EXPRESSES STRESS?

A child's age is an important factor to consider when attempting to recognise if he is showing symptoms of stress. Children may be unable to tell us what they feel as they often do not have the range of vocabulary to describe a stressful situation. Thus, stress is expressed through their behaviour. For example, a 3-year-old may cry constantly or more than usual, while an 8-year-old may suddenly get into a habit of throwing temper tantrums. These may be just some ways that a child alerts us to his inability to cope with what is going on his life at the moment.

## 2.4 HOW DO CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS?

Children have different coping strategies for dealing with stressful events and situations. They may cope by crying, throwing temper tantrums or by retreating from unpleasant situations.

Children who are in the company of supportive adults and caregivers usually develop a variety of coping strategies and are more likely to develop resilience. Many children, however, do not have a supportive environment. The result of this is

that they do not have the chance to learn positive stress management strategies.

## Infants

Infants under stress may react to stress with irritability and uncontrollable crying, and by displaying eating or sleep disorders.

## Toddlers

Toddlers may regress to more infantile forms of behaviour, such as being afraid of being alone or without their parents, withdrawing from company, biting, or being extremely sensitive to sudden or loud noises. They may also exhibit sudden outbursts of sadness, anger or aggression.

## Young children

Children in the primary school age group may react to stress by whining, withdrawing from company, being distrustful and not attending to friendships or school matters. They may also find it difficult to describe their feelings. Under stress, they may worry about the future and feel unloved.

Physical manifestations of stress may occur, especially if the child has difficulty verbalising his emotions. The child may:

- complain of headaches or stomach aches,
- have trouble sleeping,
- suffer a loss of appetite,
- pass urine more frequently.

## Adolescents

Pre-teens and adolescents under stress may be prone to prolonged periods of anger. They may also feel disillusioned, lack self-esteem and, generally, distrust everything and everyone. Sometimes, they will show extreme forms of behaviour. These range from slavish obedience to the other extreme of being rebellious and breaking rules. They may sometimes engage in high-risk activities such as drug and alcohol abuse, shoplifting and truancy. If left unchecked, depression may set in and the potential for suicide or self-harm becomes a significant concern.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Dr Nelson Lee**

Dr Nelson Lee graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1994. He has always been fascinated with the human mind and his choice to do psychiatry was a natural result of this. He also has postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and a graduate diploma in psychodynamic psychotherapy.

He is currently a psychiatrist and the Medical Director of his own private practice, The Psychological Wellness Centre. His areas of interest include anxiety, stress and mood-related disorders as well as Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in both children and adults. He also uses therapy including a psychodynamic approach as a means of helping his patients. He is also concerned with stress and general mental wellness in the workplace.

He is the author of "Elly the Elephant", a children's book about enuresis and facing up to problems, published in 2002. He enjoys interacting with children and feels that the most important work a child should be concerned with is play.

He is thankful for being blessed with a supportive mother and a loving and understanding wife, Joycelyn. He is also grateful for his own bundles of joy — his children, Matthew and Tricia. Being a parent has not only been a humbling experience for Nelson, it has also given him more practical experience in helping other parents cope with their children

### **Dr Ong Say How**

Dr Ong Say How is a child psychiatrist and Chief of the Department of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Institute of Mental Health. After obtaining his Masters in Medicine (Psychiatry) in 1999 and Graduate Diploma in Psychotherapy in 2001 from the National University of Singapore, Dr Ong completed his one-year Research Fellowship at New York Columbia University and New York State Psychiatric Institute (NYSPI) in 2005.

Since his return to Singapore, Dr Ong has been deeply engaged in outpatient services for children and adolescents with psychological problems and has conducted research work in mood disorders, schizophrenia and ADHD. He is a teaching faculty member at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, NUS and DUKE-NUS Graduate Medical School, and a core faculty member of the National Psychiatric Residency Programme.

Besides volunteering as a board member of the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH), Dr Ong is also Vice-President of the Singapore Psychiatric Association and Chairman of the Section of Child & Adolescent Psychiatrists, under the auspices of College of Psychiatrists and Academy of Medicine Singapore. He is a frequent speaker in public forums and media interviews on child mental health issues. His authorship also spans various relevant topics on children and adolescent mental health.