

# Understanding Stress

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Stress is part of living and it is part of parenting. An important part of parenting is understanding how stress affects us, and our children, so we can be ready to manage stress without hurting each other.

## **1. Recognize your stress zone**

The first step in managing stress is to recognize what degree of stress you are feeling. When you are in the green zone, you are feeling calm, comfortable, relaxed. When you are in the yellow zone, you are feeling tense. When you notice and manage how you are feeling, you can avoid entering the red zone, which is when you “snap” or “flip your lid” because you are so angry, sad, or upset.

## **2. Practice mindfulness**

Mindfulness is paying careful attention to what you are thinking and feeling, without judging those thoughts or feelings as good or bad. It means being present to what is happening in and around you, and being willing to be with these experiences exactly as they are. But mindfulness doesn't happen automatically. It is a skill that needs to be practiced. Like any skill, the more you do it the easier it becomes. To learn more about mindfulness, see the Resources listed below.

## **3. Use self-regulation strategies**

When you are very stressed (red zone), the “upstairs” or thinking brain literally stops working. The thinking brain is in charge of reasoning, planning, organizing, problem solving, and prioritizing attention. When the thinking brain is offline, the “downstairs” or emotional brain takes over.

However, when you notice that you are feeling stressed, you can use self-regulation strategies to manage your big feelings and re-connect the thinking and emotional parts of your brain. For example, when you are in the yellow or red zone:

- Stop. Close your mouth and put your hands down.
- Take a breath. Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 1 second, breathe out for 5 seconds. Or
  - Try something like walking, stretching, writing, singing, talking to a friend or family member
- Observe your thoughts and feelings using mindfulness.
- Plan a response when you are back in the green zone. This starts by reconnecting with the person or situation that was stressful, and then decide about what to do next.

When parents model self-regulation, they teach children how to self-regulate themselves.

## **4. Implement a daily routine**

Predictable daily routines help promote mental well-being and make it easier to manage stress for both children and adults. Important parts of this daily routine are getting enough sleep, exercising, and eating healthy foods.

## **5. Train your brain to think positively**

You can learn to think positively by practicing positive self-talk, also called affirmations. For example, you could say to yourself when you wake up and when you go to sleep, “I am strong and brave.” Affirmations might seem silly at first, but with regular practice you will discover that it becomes a habit to notice good things about yourself and the world. You can also teach your children to say affirmations, and this will help them to become resilient.

## Resources

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- UCLA Mindful App – download for free on your mobile device in the Apple App Store or Google Play.
- The Mindful Way Workbook by John Teasdale
- A Still Quiet Place: A Mindfulness Program for Teaching Children and Adolescents by A Saltzman
- The Whole Brain Child Workbook by DJ Siegel and TP Bryson
- <https://www.thepathway2success.com/how-to-teach-positive-self-talk/>
- Tips and references for good sleep:
  - [https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about\\_sleep/how\\_much\\_sleep.html](https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html)
  - <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1690-sleep-struggles-we-ve-got-resources>
- Greater Good in Action: Free, science-based resources to help you and your family practice forgiveness, meditation, gratitude, and more! Many of these practices can be done in as little as 1-5 minutes.
  - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>