When we talk about being stressed, it usually means we’re tense about something that’s happening in our lives. Some stress can be a good thing. It can help us get motivated to get things done. But too much stress – and how much is too much varies from person to person – can lead to other problems for some people, including depression.

WHAT IS STRESS?
Stress is a normal part of daily life. It’s a natural physical and mental response that is designed to help you cope effectively with emergencies. Among other things, stress makes your body produce chemicals that raise your heart rate and blood pressure and increase mental focus. This helps you to perform well in a challenging situation over a short period of time.

The problems from stress happen when stress is regular and doesn’t let up. The chemicals the body releases can build up and cause changes that damage your physical and mental health.

WHAT CAUSES A PERSON TO FEEL STRESSED?
There are lots of different causes for stress. Things that affect one person may not be a problem for someone else. The important thing is to work out what’s troubling you.

Stress can come from different areas of your life. There may be problems at home with your family, such as your parents splitting up or one of your parents having a new baby. Some people may have trouble with violence at home, or with physical or sexual abuse.

School can also be a cause of stress. Many young people worry about schoolwork and exams or about how they get on with other students. As well as wanting to do well for themselves, they may feel that they have to meet family expectations, and that they’re expected to do as well as friends or siblings. They may be keen to do well in their schoolwork, but have other problems like being bullied or falling out with friends. Or they may have other responsibilities that take their time, such as caring for a sick sibling or parent, or needing to work as well as going to school.

Drinking alcohol and taking drugs can also cause stress.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE STRESSED?
Most people, whether they are young or old, get stressed sometimes. Stress can be caused by a lot of different things, but common causes in young people are to do with school, work, family or relationships. Whatever the cause, the results are usually the same.

Common mental health symptoms include:
• feeling angry or irritable
• feeling anxious
• being moody and easily frustrated
• feeling like crying regularly
• having low self esteem or lacking confidence
• feeling restless all the time
• having trouble concentrating.

Common physical symptoms include:
• feeling sick in the stomach
• having constipation or diarrhoea
• having stomach aches and/or headaches
• having problems sleeping
• feeling constantly tired
• sweating a lot
• having cramps or twitches
• feeling dizzy or fainting
• eating too much or too little
• using drugs or smoking.
KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

• Everybody feels stressed sometimes – something may be happening in your life such as starting a new job or school, arguments with family, friends or a partner, or you may be worrying about schoolwork or an upcoming exam.

• If stress is excessive and never lets up, it can take a big toll on you, causing many different symptoms.

• Stress is not the same as depression – but for some people, being stressed for a long time can end up leading to depression.

• There are ways of reducing and managing stress. In the meantime, try not to spend too much time worrying about the things that are causing you stress.

• You don’t have to manage stress on your own – it’s a good idea to talk to someone (e.g., teacher, school counsellor, doctor, other adult you can trust) about how you are feeling.

TAKE TIME OUT

Don’t spend too much time worrying about things that are stressing you out. Take some time to do something distracting or something you enjoy, such as going out with friends, going to the gym or a yoga class, listening to music, playing sport or watching a movie.

KEEP THINGS BALANCED

Try to make sure you have a balance in your day between work and doing the things that you enjoy. This might mean learning to say ‘no’ more often so that you don’t take on new things that will add to your to-do list, or your stress levels.

GET ORGANISED

Organise your time so your homework and assignments are not left to the last minute and avoid studying until late at night.

EXERCISE

Physical activity such as swimming, walking, yoga, cycling, dancing or going to the gym can help reduce the tension in your muscles and your mind. Try to do some exercise every day, even if it’s just walking around the block.

RELAXATION EXERCISES

Exercises that slow your breathing and relax your muscles can help with stress. Slow breathing (three seconds in, three seconds out) for five minutes can be a useful short-term coping strategy for when you’re feeling stressed. Relaxing your muscles might help with aches and pains, fatigue, headaches and difficulty breathing. Try sitting in a comfortable and quiet room, then tense each group of muscles for 10 seconds and relax them for 10 seconds.

WHERE TO GET HELP

• Don’t wait for stress to get so bad that you start feeling depressed or helpless. Try to work out what is troubling you and then talk to someone who can help.

• If schoolwork or exams seem overwhelming, talk to a teacher or school counsellor.

• If you have a health concern that is causing you stress – maybe you think you might be pregnant or you are worried about your drug use – then speak to a doctor.

• If you are having relationship, friendship or family problems, talk to an adult you can trust.

MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

You can speak to trained counsellors by phoning these 24-hour telephone counselling services:

Lifeline 13 11 14 (cost of a local call)
Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 (freecall)

Information and support is also available from the following websites:

beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com
or www.beyondblue.org.au

Information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

headspace www.headspace.org.au
Information, support and help near you
ReachOut.com www.reachout.com
Information and support for young people going through tough times

The websites below can help you to find health services in your area. They list services that are either free of charge or low cost:

Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au
Lifeline Service Finder www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder

If you or a friend want to communicate with someone via email or online, Kids Help Line offers confidential, non-judgemental, emotional support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

SOURCEs This fact sheet is based on the following sources:

• beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com • ReachOut.com www.reachout.com
• Great Ormond Street Hospital, London www.childrenfirst.nhs.uk

Visit: www.youthbeyondblue.com
Info line: 1300 22 4636
beyondblue: the national depression initiative