

Stress and the Brain: Too Much, Too Little, and the Resilience Sweet Spot

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As a culture, we are obsessed with stress --"Stress Free in 40 Days!"-- "Go On Vacation and Leave Stress Behind!" say the advertisements. You can buy stress busters, stress exterminators, and stress eradicators.

Yet the one out of five children report worrying "a great deal" or "a lot." Millennials (young adults ages 18-33) are more likely than any other age group to be told they have an anxiety disorder or depression.

In the words of the American Psychological Association, "The kids aren't alright."

Stress and the Brain

Stress is a part of life. New experiences, transitions, real and perceived danger, deadlines, unknowns, and pressure can all evoke feelings of anxiety. Stress and emotional regulation is one of the brain's primary "executive functions," centered in the prefrontal cortex. As our children grow up, they get better at managing their emotions and coping with anxiety.

For example, it isn't uncommon to see a two year old rolling around on the floor crying when he gets hungry. By the time he is 15, we hope he has developed better coping mechanisms. You can thank his maturing cortex for sparing us the meltdown.

But because their executive functions are "under construction," children and teens alike need extra practice calming themselves down, considering alternative actions, and adapting to new and sometimes overwhelming situations.

When it comes to practice though, the correct dosage is critical. Too much stress shuts down the executive center and disrupts the brain's developing architecture. Too little stress robs the brain of practice in meeting life's challenges.

Too much stress

The brain does all kinds of great stuff but its primary job is to keep us alive. If I feel truly threatened, my *entire* brain responds by shutting down from the "top down." Executive functions and my thinking brain are a luxury in times of great danger. The stress response hijacks the cortex in order to react quickly and efficiently. Hormones like adrenaline and cortisol rush into my bloodstream to coordinate a fight-or-flight response.

The good news is that this stress response is why we humans are still around. The bad news is that *sustained* fight or flight mode wreaks havoc on both the body and the brain. Toxic stress is the type that results from prolonged, frequent, and intense experiences of

adversity without any adult support. The same hormones that improve our response in the short-term damage memory, undermine learning, and depress the immune system in the long term.

Basic feelings of safety and security enable young people to harness the power of their cortex for new learning and emotional regulation. This is why efforts to ensure that children and youth have adequate food, housing, and safety from violence, trauma and bullying are so critical to academic achievement and good health. This is also why ensuring that children and youth have caring relationships that buffer them from toxic stress is so important.

Brain science begs us to ask big and pressing questions about how we care for and protect young people.

Too little stress

As Dr. Bruce Perry shares in his book *Born for Love*, “Just as you wouldn’t build muscle by resting all week and then trying to lift a hundred pounds just one time every Friday morning, you can’t build a healthy stress response system by complete protection from stress or occasional exposure to an overwhelming dose.”

Not all stress is bad. Consider, for example, the stress that a child or teen might experience on the first day of school or in a difficult conversation with a friend. Learning how to handle appropriate stress is a healthy and normal part of development.

Our urge to protect children from harm is strong. Protection, however, can be overdone. Children and teens who haven’t had practice handling stress or taking responsibility for their actions, even when it is difficult, can become more anxious and risk averse. By overprotecting them, we inadvertently make them more vulnerable.

When children learn to deal with small challenges, they are better prepared to deal with bigger ones later on in life. If they’re never disappointed they never learn how to deal with setbacks. If they never lose, they don’t learn how to handle defeat. If they are never frustrated, they never learn persistence.

By handling ups and downs, our kids build the psychological muscles they need for life.

There may not be a roadmap, but let's agree on some goals.

Unfortunately this article doesn't end with a stress eradicator, a vacation, or a spa package. There is no clear roadmap for how every child should learn to handle stress. But a couple things are clear:

It is absolutely our job as parents, teachers, and communities to do everything in our power to protect children from toxic stress.

It is also our job to make sure that our kids learn how to handle appropriate stress.

Goal One: Let's work together to tackle toxic stress in our schools and communities. It is a big and complicated goal, but a worthy one.

Goal Two: Let's leave the quick n' easy stress busters on the shelf and opt for building resilience instead.

Resilience is the ability to overcome adversity and to bounce back from challenge. Resilience is what enables children to fall down and pick themselves up again. Resilience is not hard wired. It can be nurtured and learned.

Here are some places to start:

- Prioritize building warm, caring connections with children and teens.
- Praise effort and persistence more than natural talent.
- Don't do things for children and youth that they can do for themselves.
- Provide clear and consistent limits and consequences.
- Listen to and validate children's feelings.
- Encourage children and youth to come up with solutions to challenges.
- Set realistic but high expectations.
- Expect children and youth to take on responsibilities and contribute to their community.