

What is Stress?

Stress is your mind and body's response to a real or imagined threat, event, or change. We all experience stress at times. It is a normal part of life. It can sometimes help to motivate us to get a task finished, or perform well. Stress can also be harmful if we become over-stressed and it interferes with our ability to get on with our normal life for too long.

Type of Stress	What is it?	Examples
+ Good stress	Motivates you to action or to continue working.	Helps you perform during sports, meet a deadline at work, gives your courage to accomplish something or meet a goal
- Bad stress	When stress is too high to handle and your body and/or mind responds negatively	Can't sleep because of worry, make poor decisions because you can't think straight

Your thinking brain:

The Prefrontal Cortex

This area is responsible for "executive functions" - complex thought like logic, reasoning, problem-solving, making decisions, and planning.

Your feeling brain:

The Limbic System

This area of your brain works like the brain of a reptile. It helps protect us from danger without wasting time or energy. It connects directly to the nervous system and controls the automatic parts of our body like reflexes, breathing and heartbeat. It's also where our emotions come from.



When Stress Happens:

Fight or Flight

When the feeling part of your brain senses danger, it releases a chemical that causes a chain reaction. This is known as "fight or flight", preparing you for battle or escape. You can feel it as your heart beats faster, your blood pressure rises, your muscles clench, and negative feelings rise.

Different Parts of Your Brain Have Different Purposes

To get ready for running or fighting, your body starts thinking from the feeling part of your brain instead of the thinking part of your brain.

How does this affect a family?

In an effort to keep us safe, stress chemicals crowd out positive brain chemicals, creating feelings of discomfort that we really want to stop. All of the sudden, our brains find it harder to understand, retain & analyze information, solve problems, and think creatively. Because of this, people under stress can make poor choices due to:



Tunnel Vision: Since our brain isn't as prepared to process new information, it may consider fewer choices and focus in on a solution without your normal, systematic scanning and analysis.



Snap decisions: Our brain is built to make decisions quickly. Under stress, our brains can react before we even realize it.



Isolation/distance: As our brains start thinking in survival mode, we can often get less patient and less loving. When this happens, those we love sometimes get pushed away or hurt.

Our children can feel it: Infants experience and perceive ranges of emotions like sadness and fear before they are 6 months old. Our children will learn from the way we handle our stress.

Our bodies feel it: A build-up of stress can lead to health problems like allergies, a sore neck or back, headaches, upset stomach, high blood pressure and heart disease.

What can I do when I am stressed?

1. Recognize it.

Notice the signs of being stressed. Our body reacts to stress and we can feel the changes in our body and mind when this happens. If we know when we are using only our “feeling brain”, we can pause the things that are easier to do with our “thinking brain” like making decisions and having hard conversations.

Some signs that we are stressed include:

- Feeling angry, irritable or hopeless a lot of the time
- Having trouble making decisions
- Crying easily
- Worrying all the time
- Arguing with friends, your partner, family, coworkers
- Overeating or not eating enough
- Being unable to sleep or wanting to sleep all the time



Pay attention to your thoughts and your self-talk. Are you believing truths or lies? Are you thinking negatively of yourself? When we are stressed we sometimes say things in our head, over and over, that just add to our stress. This unhelpful self-talk might include things like: ‘I can’t cope’, or ‘I’m too busy’, or ‘I’m so tired’ or ‘It’s not fair’. While we might think that these are truthful descriptions of what’s going on, they are not helpful to repeat, and can make you feel worse.

Identify what’s making you stressed. Everyone’s stressors are different. Yours might be related to money, work, your surroundings (traffic, crime), your partner, your children’s behavior, or health issues.

2. Self-soothe.



Relax! Try deep breathing, meditation, yoga, journaling or listening to music. Take time to play a game and laugh with your kids. Relaxing allows your brain processing to shift back into the “thinking brain”.



Positive self-talk: Look back at previous times when you have overcome challenges. Think, “This too shall pass.” Focus on the positive. Try more helpful self-talk like, ‘I’m doing well given what’s on my plate’, or ‘Calm down’, or ‘Breathe easy’.



Keep things in perspective: When we are stressed, it’s easy to see things as worse than they really are. Try self-talk such as ‘This is not the end of the world’ or ‘In the big picture, this doesn’t matter so much’.



Remember: Learning to manage your stress will improve your happiness and show your children that they can handle stress!

Take time for yourself. Take a bath, read a book, or pick up a hobby. When you can, hire a babysitter (or trade time with a friend or neighbor) and get out for a few hours. Put your kids to bed early to get some extra time to rest.

3. Address it.

Establish routines: Having predictable rhythms and routines in your day, or over a week, can be very calming and reassuring, and can help you to manage your stress.

Accept what you cannot change. Ask yourself, “Can I do anything about it?” If the answer is no, try to focus on something else. Imagine you are juggling balls, and only a few of the balls are glass. These represent the most important priorities in your life. Identify which “balls” you can let drop and which you cannot.



Change what you can. If there is something you can do (look for a new job, for example), go for it! Break it into smaller steps so it doesn’t feel overwhelming.



Take care of your health. Getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercise can make a big difference in your stress level.

Develop a support network. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Older children can set the table. Your spouse or partner could take over bedtime a few nights a week. Friends might pick up the kids from school to give you a break.



Practice being thankful. Think about the good in your life. Pick 3 things you are thankful for, big or small, and focus on those.

What is Stress and How Does it Affect Our Brain?

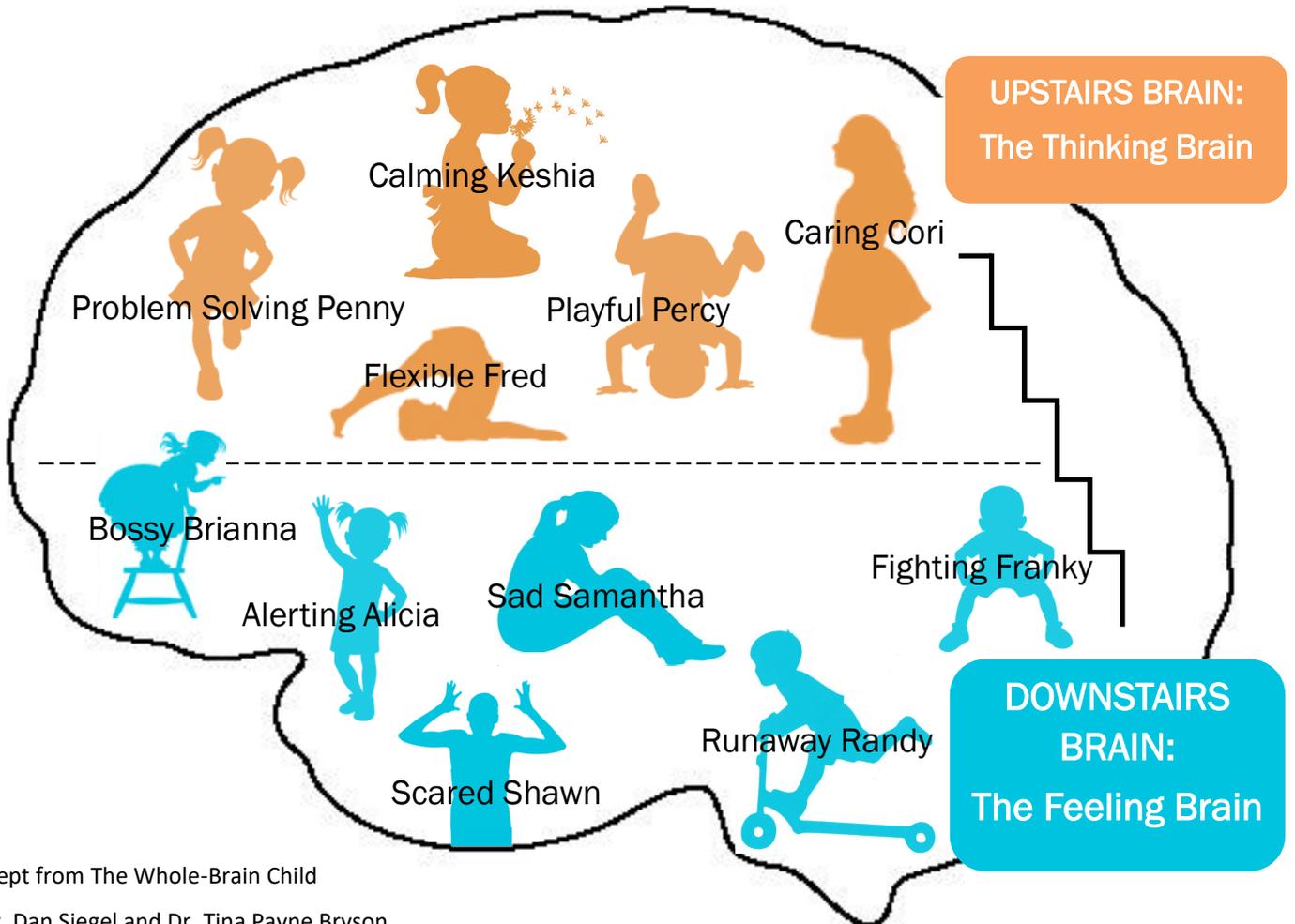
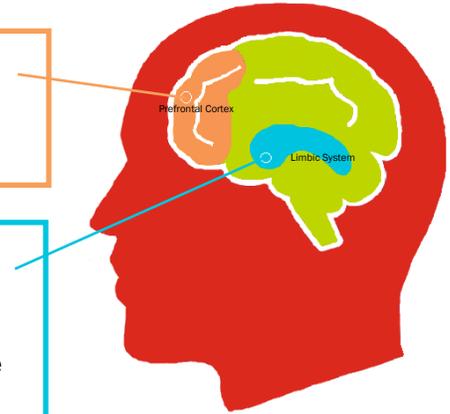
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Upstairs Brain: The Thinking Brain

Responsible for “executive functions” - complex thought like logic, reasoning, problem-solving, making decisions, and planning.

Downstairs Brain: The Feeling Brain

Works like the brain of a reptile, it helps protect us from danger without wasting time or energy. It connects directly to the nervous system and controls the automatic parts of our body like breathing, reflexes and heartbeat. It's also where our emotions come from.



Concept from The Whole-Brain Child

By Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

What can I do when I am stressed?

1. Recognize it.

What signs of stress have you noticed?

Some signs that we are stressed include:

- Feeling angry, irritable or hopeless a lot of the time
- Having trouble making decisions
- Crying easily
- Worrying all the time
- Arguing with friends, your partner, family, coworkers
- Overeating or not eating enough
- Being unable to sleep or wanting to sleep all the time
- _____



Pay attention to your thoughts and your self-talk. What kind of self-talk are you experiencing?

What is making you stressed?

2. Self-soothe.



What kinds of things help you relax? _____



What positive phrases help you overcome stress? _____



Remember: Keep things in perspective. Try self-talk such as 'This is not the end of the world' or 'In the big picture, this doesn't matter so much'.



What did you do this week to take time for yourself? _____

3. Address it.

How have you established a routine this week? _____

What are some things you cannot change? _____

What are some things you CAN change? _____

What things can you do to improve your health this week? _____

Who are some people you can rely on for a support network? _____

What are you thankful for this week? _____

