

Toxic and Tolerable Stress: Developing Healthy Coping Strategies

Three Types of Stress

1. Positive Stress
2. Tolerable Stress
3. Toxic Stress

Positive Stressors

- Daily adversities we learn to tolerate or overcome which can then help us build resiliency for greater stressors later in life.
- For example, the first day of school is a common stressor for most children.
- When a young child experiences stress in a supportive environment, the effects of stress can be buffered. Over time, this results in the development of healthy stress response systems.

Tolerable Stressors

- Include things such as the death of a loved one or natural disasters.
- Because the stressor is more pronounced, the body can trigger an even greater stress response.
- But, with the support of healthy adults, the child's response can be reduced without any long-term effects.

Toxic Stressors

- Long lasting and unmanageable adversities that some children face without the buffering support of a caring adult.
- Toxic stressors would include adversities such as abuse or neglect.
- When caring relationships are unavailable to the child after these stresses, the result can be damaged stress responses and lifelong repercussions.
- Experiencing a high level of stress results in the body being continuously exposed to stress hormones. While these hormones can be advantageous in the short term, long exposures can cause cell breakdown within the body.
- In addition, highly stressed children develop neural connections that reinforce thoughts that they are not safe and cannot rely on others.

How Can Parents Help?

Set clear and consistent boundaries

- It can be easy to want to allow children to do as they please when we feel they have gone through a hard time but having set expectations actually builds in an element of safety for a child.

Allow for some accommodations if the child is overwhelmed

- For example, we can take breaks more frequently when working on homework while still having the expectation that homework is completed.

Promote consistency in your child's or youth's day

- This can also help in developing feelings of safety.

Allow for choice as much as possible

Validate

- Encourage your teenagers or little ones to be a part of conversations that will affect them and validate the feelings they express during your discussions.

Remember . . .

- Your relationship with your child or youth is important to reducing stress and increasing coping skills.
- The best predictor of a child's ability to overcome adversity is the presence of one supportive adult in that child's life. With your support, your children and teenagers can continue to learn from the stressors in their lives and can build the resiliency to carry them through the rest of their development.

Resources

- Harvard Center for the Developing Child (2017). Serve and Return: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>
- Teenmentalhealth.org (2018). Parents: <http://teenmentalhealth.org/care/parents/>
- The Psychology Foundation of Canada (2016). Kids can cope: Parenting resilient children at home and at school: <https://www.dsb1.ca/Programs/MHWP/Programs/Documents/Parenting%20Resilient%20Children.pdf>
- Harvard Center for the Developing Child (2017). Toxic Stress: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>
- Call Health Link Alberta: 811
- CYFAMH Intake: 780-342-2701
- Youth Addiction Services Edmonton: 780-422-7383
- Mobile Response Team: 780-427-4491
- Call 211 – Alberta Community resources
- CMHA Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868