



LifeSmarts

Learn it. Live it.

Key Points

STRESS ISN'T ALWAYS BAD

Some stress is normal and can even motivate you, but chronic or overwhelming stress can be harmful.

TOXIC STRESS AFFECTS THE BODY AND BRAIN

When stress doesn't go away and support is lacking, it can disrupt development and long-term health.

STRESS CAN BE INVISIBLE

Toxic stress isn't always obvious—but it can silently impact mood, behavior, and physical health.

SUPPORT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

Having trusted adults, healthy relationships, and coping tools can buffer the effects of toxic stress.

Core Concepts

ACEs CAN INCREASE RISK

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) like abuse, neglect, or instability are linked to toxic stress.

EARLY EXPERIENCES SHAPE THE BRAIN

Chronic stress in childhood can disrupt brain development and long-term learning.

THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE

Toxic stress can raise cortisol levels, weaken the immune system, and even affect memory and focus.

COPING IS A LEARNED SKILL

Learning how to handle stress through breathing, movement, or creative outlets can build resilience.

STRESS RESPONSES VARY

Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn—everyone reacts differently when under stress or threat.

RESILIENCE CAN BE BUILT

Supportive relationships and coping strategies help buffer the effects of toxic stress.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Toxic stress is common, but help is available. Talking to a counselor or trusted adult is a strong first step.

StudySmart Guide - StudySmart Guide - StudySmart Guide - StudySmart Guide

Understanding Toxic Stress

Additional Resources

Harvard University Center on the Developing Child – Toxic Stress

Overview of what toxic stress is, how it affects the brain and body, and why supportive relationships matter

<https://bit.ly/4ftCw8>

First 5 California – Stop Toxic Stress Before It Starts

Practical tips for parents and caregivers using the “Be Calm, Be Steady, Be There, Be Nurturing” approach

<https://bit.ly/3Ja1uH8>

YouTube - Stanford Graduate School

Mobilizing healthcare to combat Toxic Stress

<https://bit.ly/4lktipJ>

YouTube - TED

How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime

<https://bit.ly/4fNKtPz>

Listen to the Podcast



Explore and Explain

1. What makes toxic stress different from everyday stress or pressure?
2. How can long-term exposure to toxic stress affect the brain and body over time?
3. Why is having a support system important when dealing with stressful or traumatic experiences?
4. What protective factors can help reduce the impact of toxic stress in teens and young adults?

Toxic stress can affect how you think, feel, and grow—but learning how to recognize it and get support can help protect your long-term health.

Toxic Stress



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Acronyms

ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences

CDC

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SEL

Social and Emotional Learning

Vocabulary

ALLOSTATIC LOAD

The gradual physical damage caused by ongoing or repeated stress

CHRONIC STRESS

Ongoing stress that can damage mental and physical health if not addressed

CORTISOL

A stress hormone that, in high levels over time, can harm your brain, immune system, and metabolism

NEURODEVELOPMENT

The brain's growth and development, which can be disrupted by toxic stress

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Conditions or supports—like caring adults or safe environments—that reduce the effects of stress and help build resilience

RESILIENCE

The ability to recover from stress or hardship and adapt in a healthy way

STRESS RESPONSE

The body's automatic reaction to danger; staying activated too long can harm your health

TOLERABLE STRESS

Serious but short-term stress that can be managed with strong support systems

TOXIC STRESS

Severe, ongoing stress without support that can cause long-term physical and emotional harm