

Healing Young Minds: Helping Children Thrive in a Stress-Filled World

by [Scott Shannon, MD](#)

Introduction

A five-year-old boy begins kindergarten. He goes to school from 8:15 till 3:15, which seems an eternity. After lunch, he longs for a nap, or at least some time to glide back and forth on the swings. Instead, he sits and copies words from a text onto his notebook. The arrangement of letters makes no sense to him. The teacher encourages him to sound out the words, but he can't. He envies his younger sister, who gets to stay home. When he climbs into the car most afternoons, his sister gaily tells him what she and "my mommy" have done in his absence. Sometimes his jealousy swells so painfully within his chest that he has to hit his sister in order to breathe again. Even though he knows this action will provoke his mother to yell at him, he can't control the impulse. Just after Thanksgiving, he develops chronic stomachaches. His mother takes him to the doctor, who can find nothing wrong.

A teenage girl notices her long, red hair comes out in handfuls when she showers or brushes her hair. Otherwise, her health is good. Her grades are excellent. She plays varsity sports. Teachers and peers like her. Between the demands of academics and athletics, she often stays up late finishing her homework. The pediatrician can't find anything wrong, nor can the dermatologist.

A previously well-adjusted eight-year-old boy has taken to chewing the cuffs of his shirt sleeves, sweaters, and jackets. His expression is pinched and anxious. He seems to always have a cold. Smaller than most of the other kids in his class, he is a common target of teasing and bullying. Lately, he has been making excuses to stay home from school. He has trouble sleeping. He cries when either of his parents leaves on a business trip. He admits that he fears they might die and not return.

An eleven-year-old girl's parents divorce. She spends weekdays with her mother and weekends with her father. Her parents do their best to get along with each other and to make things easier for their daughter. Despite their efforts, their daughter's grades begin to fall. She has trouble concentrating on her studies. As she sits at her desk, she snacks on crackers or candy and listens to her stereo. When her jeans become uncomfortably snug, she takes to wearing sweat pants. Her friends stop calling. At home, she rarely leaves her room, except to eat meals or watch television. She feels tired all the time. Her mother has trouble getting her up for school, even though she sleeps ten hours a night.

A ten-year-old boy is sent to the school psychologist because he repeatedly gets into fistfights on the playground and refuses to follow the teacher's instructions. He lives

with his mother and an older brother and sister. His father left when he was so young he doesn't remember what he looked like. His mother works as a secretary at the newspaper. Sometimes she works evenings. When she does, the boy's older sister is supposed to look after him. Sometimes she takes him to parties, where he sees kids making out and drinking. Sometimes she takes him to movies, movies that are typically laden with sex and violence. Sometimes the two of them just hang out and watch TV. Sometimes she leaves him home alone. He doesn't mind. That way, he can watch cartoons and the Disney station without his sister calling him a baby.

Although the children described above have different stories, they all have one thing in common: they are under stress. More to the point, excessive stress has overwhelmed their abilities to cope. As a result, they have developed symptoms: depression, anxiety, anger, poor concentration, weight change, sleep disturbance, headaches, stomach aches, hair loss, and combative and defiant behavior.

If you are a parent or anyone who works with children, you are probably well aware that children today have to deal with too much stress too soon in their young lives. They have too much homework and too little after-school supervision. If their parents are still married, it's likely that both of them work. Diets have grown thin on critical nutrients, even as the childhood obesity rate has skyrocketed to 15 percent. Kids get neither enough exercise, nor sufficient sleep. Unstructured time has practically become an endangered species. Musical lyrics have become darker. Music videos are often X-rated. Many kids don't feel safe in their schools and neighborhoods. In addition to books, some kids keep weapons, drugs, and alcohol in their lockers. It's enough to make the kids who don't very nervous. Hardly a week goes by without headlines of a kid maiming or killing someone, without headlines of a child being abducted or abused, or without the media reminding us of the eminent threat of a terrorist attack.

As stress has mounted, so have rates of childhood mental illness. So many kids have attention deficit disorders, anxiety disorders, depression and bipolar disorder that school administrators have had to take on the task of doling out medications. Visit any summer camp, and you likely see long lines forming outside the nurse's office when it's time for the morning and evening medication distribution.

As a child psychiatrist, I have seen an increase in both the number of kids who come to me showing clear symptoms of stress, and the number of kids with symptoms of depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, attention deficit disorders, and hyperactivity. A few decades ago, many of these illnesses were uncommon or practically unheard of in children.

What has caused this increase? Genetics can contribute to mental illness, but it's not as though the country's gene pool has changed much over the past several decades. Certainly, we have become better at recognizing mental illness, but increased awareness can't explain everything. I believe there's a link between the increased burdens placed on kids and the rise in mental illness.

We have propelled kids into dealing with adult problems before they're able. As a result, they're developing physical and psychological ailments previously relegated to adulthood. Kids have obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and symptoms of stress, many of which mimic those of several psychiatric conditions. Depending upon the child, stress can diminish concentration, increase activity, darken mood, increase anxiety, and provoke aggression.

Not only can stress produce symptoms that mimic mental illness, but it can also activate mental illness. Every child possesses certain vulnerabilities and stress erodes any native resistance to these susceptibilities. Stress undermines a child's ability to cope and to maintain health. Stress can cause one child to develop recurrent colds, another to develop migraine headaches, another to become depressed, anxious, inattentive, or hyperactive.

How has childhood stress gotten so out of hand? I like to think that we adults are neither negligent nor cruel. Rather, there are a number of less sinister factors explaining why well-meaning parents miss signs of stress. We've become so inured to our culture's fast pace and ambiance that we have accepted the way we tear madly about as normal. We may be so busy and overwhelmed ourselves as to fail to notice that our children are struggling. Or we may chalk up our children's behaviors as part and parcel of a developmental stage. We think, "He's just going through the terrible twos", or "the terrible teenage years." Our children may hide their problems from us, or they may only be able to describe the physical symptoms such as headache or upset stomach. Or we may recognize that there are problems (academic demands out of proportion to the child's abilities or an unsafe neighborhood or school bullies), but not know what to do about them.

Indeed, many parents do fret that their kids are struggling to cope with too much too soon. Both in my clinical practice and at social gatherings, the main topic on other parents' minds is their kids' struggles. What to do about the mean girls who won't let their daughter sit with them, what to do about their sons' angry outbursts, what to do about poor focus and hyperactivity...

Although many parents, educators, and mental health professionals are rightly concerned with the issues of violence, sex, drug use and other disturbing trends, we often let more peripheral debates sideline us. We discuss whether to put metal detectors in schools, whether to randomly test kids for drugs, whether safe sex discussions belong in the classroom, or whether we should allow our 2nd grader to watch PG13 movies because all the other kids are doing it. There's no question that modern life stresses kids and we have to begin to do something about it. Nevertheless, we have to ask more important questions about why kids commit violent acts, engage in premature and promiscuous sex, and take drugs.

Many of us are worried about these things, but don't know how to help our children. How, you may well wonder, can you change the school system, disarm your entire neighborhood, or throw a monkey wrench in the whirring gears of American culture?

You can't. That is, you can't precipitate widespread social revolution. Of course, you can take steps to rectify some of the stresses (turn off the TV, establish reasonable bedtimes, feed your child healthy food). You can alter your child's *perception* of stress and help him manage it. In fact, many small improvements in your child's life can go a long way toward healing his mind.

For the unavoidable slings and arrows your child will encounter, you can armor your child against them. Those defenses are the skills of resilience. Many of us take our children's "resilience" for granted. Compared to us adults, they still show a remarkable ability to bounce back from adversity. However, their innate resilience may not always be up to the task of coping with the myriad modern stressors. It's up to us adults to be aware of the pervasive effects of stress on our children and to enhance their resilience. I'll devote several chapters to giving you practical ways to give your child the lifestyle habits, thinking habits, emotional skills, social skills and spiritual cushioning that will help him recover from small disappointments and major disasters.

Of course, your child may develop a problem of such severity that you need professional help. Sadly, your child may not get the kind of help he really needs. For one, the doctor may not realize that the underlying problem is stress. For another, the trap physicians and parents alike have fallen into is to restrict treatment to correcting the child's behavior or eliminating symptoms. Doing those things is certainly important. Unfortunately, we often neglect to get to the root of the problem. In the case of stress, we either need to remove it or help the child learn to cope with it.

Regardless of whether the symptoms are those of stress overload or of stress-activated mental illness, the standard medical practice of treating symptoms with a pill falls short. Because misdiagnosis is not uncommon, the prescribed drug may fail to do good and may in fact even do harm. For example, I often see kids misdiagnosed with attention-deficit disorder whose problem is stress overload. In such cases, stimulant medications like Ritalin only serve to aggravate symptoms and don't help the child solve the underlying problem. Even if the diagnosis is correct, drug treatment alone addresses the symptoms while ignoring the stress that underlies the disorder(s).

Granted, medications are sometimes lifesavers for kids with psychological difficulties, but I think it's a mistake to stop there. While drugs offer symptom relief, they are at best a half-measure, a finger in the dyke. If we want our children truly to heal, we must look at them in all their wonderful complexity and devise a treatment plan that works with each child's individual strengths and weaknesses.

In *Healing Young Minds*, I'll show you the many other healing therapies I use to help kids get better. Fortunately, a whole array of options exists. In my practice, I employ everything from dietary changes to yoga, psychotherapy, acupuncture, vitamins, herbal supplements and medications. Some of these therapies are so simple and inexpensive that you can employ them yourself. For others, you'll need to work in partnership with a mental health specialist. But at least you'll know how to go about doing so.

On a bright note, children have a natural drive toward health. Their brains, minds and spirits are amazingly resilient. All most kids need is for someone to remove the roadblocks and they will spontaneously heal body, mind and soul. Believe me; I've seen hundreds of kids recover, even children who have suffered horrible trauma. I look forward to telling some of their stories and to sharing with you the steps that have helped them mend.