



## The face of stress and anxiety

### Is anxiety a concern?

As a parent, you know that your teen, like all their peers, is going through some challenging times related to their development. During their teenage years, children undergo many transformations—to their body, mind, family dynamic and social circle. It's a stage characterized by a string of changes that can spark concerns, stress and anxiety, for both you and your child. For all these reasons, adolescence is an opportune and crucial time to learn how to deal with uncertainty, especially since it corresponds to the time when anxiety disorders begin to develop (Claes, 2003).

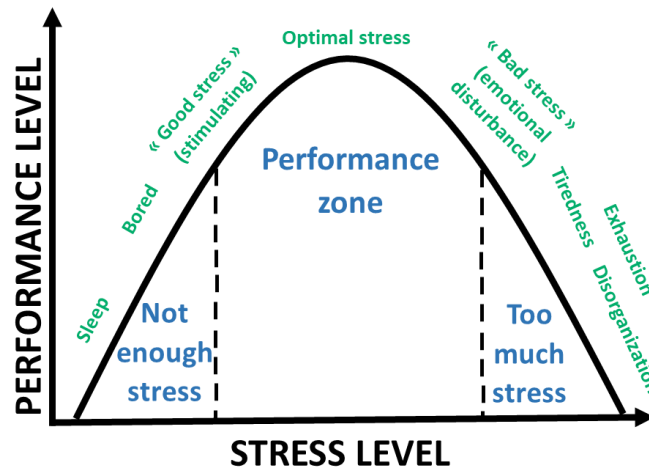
Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health disorders in teens (Costello, 2011). They appear during early childhood or adolescence, causing a range of functional difficulties that can worsen over the course of a lifetime (Piché *et al.*, 2017).

### What about stress?

Stress is an alarm reaction to a real, concrete situation. It triggers an activation reaction (fight, flight, or freeze) that is essential to our survival. When we're faced with a situation we perceive as dangerous, our brain triggers the physiological reactions needed to confront it (Lupien, 2019; Marchand *et al.*, 2018). For example, if you're hiking on a wooded trail and come face to face with a bear, the stress you feel in that moment is justified, useful and essential. It gives you the energy needed to either run away or defend yourself. On the other hand, if you don't feel stress and you simply continue on your way without worrying about the bear, then you'll be in danger. The same goes for the stressful situations you encounter on a daily basis. However, if you react the same way to an ant as you do to a bear, you'll be wasting a lot of energy for nothing!

So, in reasonable amounts, stress can boost your performance. Just think about athletes who perform at their peak in major competitions. However, cumulative stress, prolonged stress or too much stress can affect your performance, cause you to waste energy and even burn out. Too much stress can also cause you to develop other health problems, and make you angry, emotionally unstable or irritable. The opposite is also true. No stress or too little stress can cause you to underreact, lower your energy level, or fail to see the danger in a given situation (Shih and Lin, 2017; Strack *et al.*, 2017).

The inverted stress curve (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908) shows how stress is necessary when it's well controlled (Palazzolo and Arnaud, 2013).



**But what's the difference between stress and anxiety?**

While stress is an alarm reaction to a real, concrete situation, anxiety is worrying about a situation that hasn't happened yet (Lupien, 2019). A situation doesn't have to be real to trigger an anxiety reaction. For example, your child may be stressed about an oral presentation they have to give the next day. But if they're worried about failing their year because of this presentation that they haven't even given yet, that's anxiety. In this situation, your child is dreading a situation that isn't real, because they haven't yet done badly on their oral presentation, let alone failed their year.

**When does anxiety become a problem?**

Everyone is likely to experience anxiety at some point in their life, especially when confronted with change. Anxiety becomes problematic when it causes a person to feel distressed or unable to function properly. Anxiety can manifest in many ways and very differently from one person to the next (Dumas, 2013). Anxiety can appear as catastrophic, negative or rigid thoughts, physical symptoms (heart palpitations, stomachache, etc.), avoidance behaviours such as fleeing anxiety-provoking situations or talking a lot as a distraction, and safety-focused behaviours such as always having a phone handy to call for help (Neil *et al*, 2016). If your child has anxiety, that doesn't mean they have an anxiety disorder. But, if you can teach them how to cope better with their anxiety, this will serve them well for the rest of their life and possibly prevent the anxiety from escalating.

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