



STRESS LESS TOOLKIT *week*[®]

A guide for programming to reduce stress, promote self-care, and build supportive communities.



INTRODUCTION

ACTIVE MINDS' STRESS LESS WEEK® TOOLKIT is designed to provide education about stress and anxiety and build communities that are supportive of mental health. Stress Less Week spreads the message that speaking up about one's struggles is a sign of strength and promoting self-care is a priority. Stress Less Week can be any week that makes sense in your year. As a national organization, Active Minds runs this program once in the spring and once in the fall.

Inside this toolkit you'll find education, tips, and resources designed to help you better understand and mitigate your stress while helping to shape a positive mental health culture among your community.

How to use this Toolkit:

- Learn about stress and anxiety and how to differentiate between them.
- Evaluate your own stress and anxiety triggers and solutions.
- Create a self-care toolkit.
- Share what you've learned with your community through a planned Stress Less Week.



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SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY TO STRESS LESS



THE GOAL OF Stress Less Week® is to get people in your community thinking about how they cope and take care of themselves when they are stressed. It helps people identify simple ways to take care of themselves and the

importance of doing so. It reminds people that self-care can help, but sometimes something more serious is going on and self-care isn't enough – help is needed. Whatever programming you do, be sure to include an educational component and

information on anxiety disorders, which are the most common mental health problems for young adults. Let others know about how to tell the difference between stress and anxiety disorders and where they can go for help.

PLAN AN EVENT:

- **Share V-A-R:** Plan a training for student groups at school (clubs, teams, or residential halls) so they can show up for each other in stressful times using the Active Minds V-A-R® Toolkit. Find ideas in the toolkit to share validation skills through Chalk It Out or Validation Exchange events.
- **Stress Relief:** Organize 5-minute massages, tea time, study break, snack stop, or other calming activities. Find creative ways to promote stress relief during particularly rigorous times.
- **Peer Panel Discussion:** Recruit a few people to talk about what stress or anxiety look like for them and how they cope as part of a panel discussion.
- **Pet Therapy:** Partner with a local animal shelter to bring pets to your community for stress relief and fun.
- **Get Crafty:** Get creative with paint, crafts, or coloring. Use music and themes to create a fun event that relieves stress.
- **Host a Speaker:** Host a professional Active Minds Speaker who can help normalize stress and anxiety for your campus or community.

CONNECT:

- **We Time:** Start a virtual or in-person book club, movie night, or game night with others. Designate that time to be present with each other and enjoy an activity without your phones/screens.
- **Self-Care Challenge:** Initiate a competition among friends to engage in at least one self-care practice per day and post about it on social media or within a group text.

PLAN YOUR STRESS LESS WEEK

TIPS AND PROGRAMMING IDEAS FOR STRESS LESS ACTIVITIES

SHARE:

- **Idea exchange:** Collaborate with your community to build a list of self-care ideas. Ask everyone to add their favorite self-care tip to a hat and have everyone draw one and commit to practicing that tip for a week.
- **Take a Break:** Challenge participants to schedule 30 minutes or one hour to take a break alone or together for a walk, yoga class, breathing workshop, or a shared snack.
- **Stress Less Kits:** Create a toolbox for someone else that includes ways to focus on self-care, such as:
 - Stress balls*
 - V-A-R Cards*
 - Here-For-You Stickers*
 - "When It's More Than A Bad Day" Pocket Guide*
 - "Get Help" cards for mental health*
 - Fidget toys
 - Self-care checklists
 - Water bottles
 - Journals
 - Tips to stress less
 - Candles with relaxing scents and positive messages and resources

* For these items and more ideas to include in your stress less kit go to activeminds.org/store

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USE THESE HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM ACTIVE MINDS

**UP YOUR
SELF-CARE GAME:**

activeminds.org/selfcare

**BRING MENTAL
HEALTH ADVOCACY
TO YOUR
WORKPLACE:**

activeminds.org/atwork

**BOOK A MENTAL
HEALTH SPEAKER:**

activeminds.org/speakers

**LEARN MORE
ABOUT OFFERING
HELP:**

activeminds.org/bethere

**RESOURCES FOR
OFFERING HELP:**

activeminds.org/resources

**WHERE TO GO
IF YOU NEED
IMMEDIATE HELP:**

activeminds.org/gethelp

**UNDERSTANDING
ANXIETY VS.
STRESS:**

activeminds.org/stress-or-anxiety

**MANAGING
ANXIETY:**

activeminds.org/managing-anxiety

**USING & SHARING
THE V-A-R® GUIDE:**

activeminds.org/var

UNDERSTAND AND LEARN TO MANAGE STRESS

WE ALL EXPERIENCE STRESS

from time to time. Our stress levels may change throughout our lives in response to our environment and circumstances. Often, the stress, feelings, and emotions that we experience are associated with

our current circumstances. Know that it is okay and valid to go through periods of stress, sadness, anger, disappointment and other emotions. Life is complex and stressors can be healthy responses to the challenges that life can bring.

Use the resources in the following pages to understand your own stress and to create a self-care toolkit for use year-round, and consider how you might share these tools with your community during your Stress Less Week.

SOME STRESS IS PRODUCTIVE

and some is problematic. Productive stress can help us to stay motivated, work toward goals, and feel good about life.

Stress responses are normal reactions to environmental or internal challenges and can be considered adaptive in nature. Distress occurs when stress is severe, prolonged, or both.

Stress is a normal and physiological response to things that happen around us and to us. And, it is important to recognize when stress becomes too much, and potentially problematic, so that it may be treated appropriately.

SOME STRESS IS

PROBLEMATIC when it is prolonged, seemingly uncontrollable, and can result in unwanted changes to our physical and mental health. Unmanaged problematic stress can take a toll on our neurological and hormonal responses that are necessary for keeping our bodies and minds in balance.



ACTIVITIES THAT MAY ELICIT PRODUCTIVE STRESS

- Trying something outside of your comfort zone
- Setting a challenging goal around your interests
- Traveling somewhere new and exciting
- Meeting new people
- Engaging in physical activity
- Learning a new skill
- Starting a new job

PRODUCTIVE STRESS MAY...

- Increase focus
- Provide productive energy
- Increase motivation
- Be experienced as excitement
- Feel manageable
- Build confidence
- Improve performance

PROBLEMATIC STRESS MAY...

- Decrease focus
- Cause restless energy
- Intensify procrastination
- Be experienced as fear
- Feel overwhelming
- Build insecurity
- Impair performance

AM I STRESSED OR ANXIOUS?

MOST PEOPLE WILL EXPERIENCE STRESS AND ANXIETY AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF STRESS AND ANXIETY INCLUDE:

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Indigestion
- Changes in eating patterns

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- Worrying
- Nervousness
- Self-doubt
- Uneasiness
- Irritability
- Sadness

MENTAL SYMPTOMS

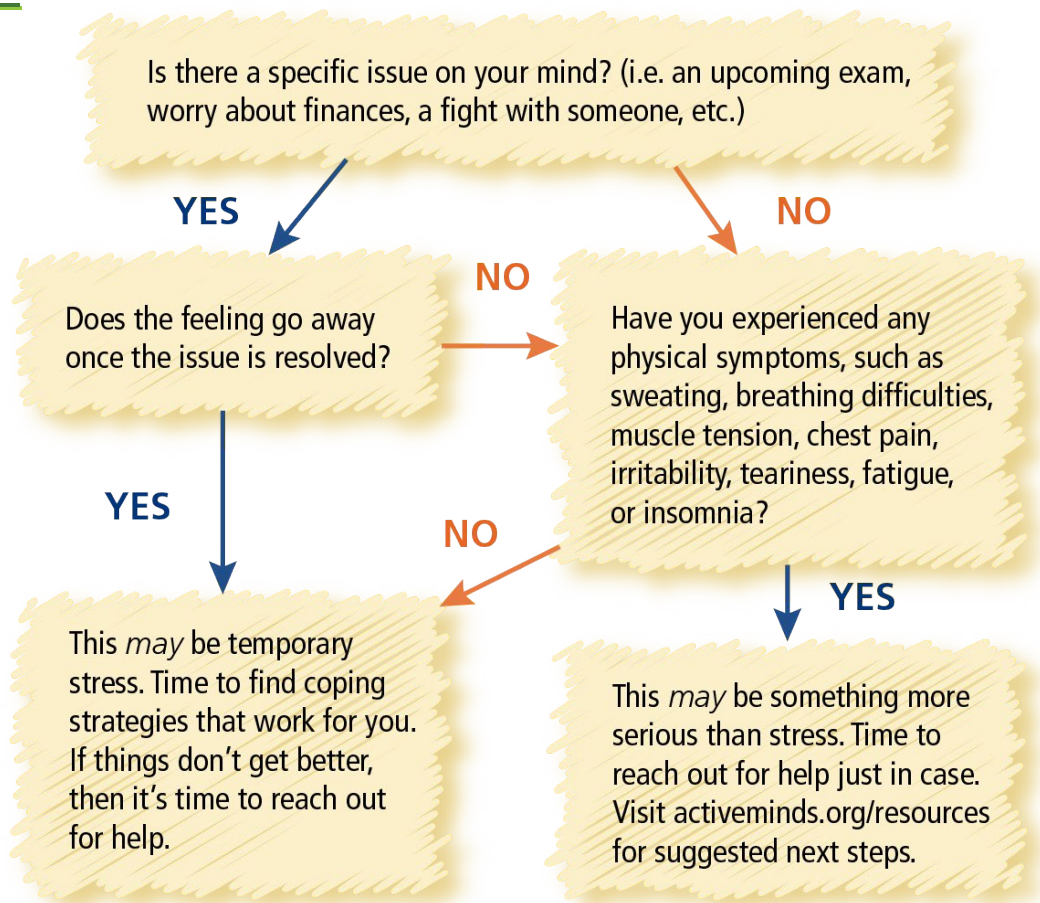
- Inability to concentrate
- Forgetfulness
- Tiredness
- Negativity
- Confusion
- Irritability

SOCIAL SYMPTOMS

- Loneliness
- Withdrawal
- Isolation



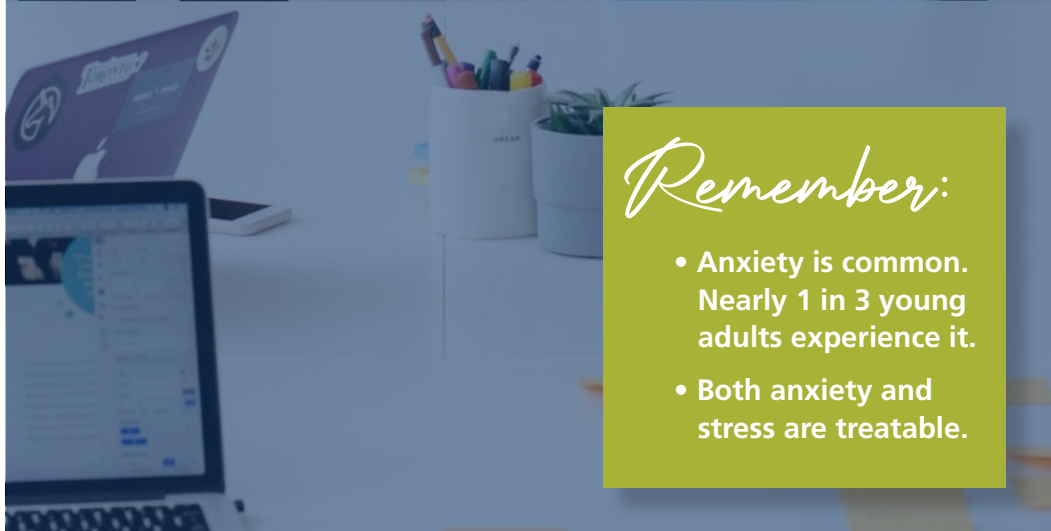
SOME STRESS CAN BE MITIGATED by engaging in self-care activities and habits, while some stress will need additional support.



ANXIETY IS DIFFERENT and more serious than stress, which is adaptive and can be protective.

Stress and anxiety are part of the same bodily reaction and have similar symptoms. That means it can be hard to tell them apart. If symptoms of stress are persistent, intensify, and last more than two weeks, you may be experiencing anxiety or another mental health struggle. Anxiety may manifest as more severe or persistent stress symptoms. Untreated anxiety or persistent stress can be debilitating.

If you think you or someone you know is experiencing anxiety, it may be time to **seek professional support**. A therapist may be able to help you identify causes and manage triggers and symptoms. Doctors may be able to rule out underlying medical conditions contributing to anxiety symptoms. Psychiatrists and doctors may also prescribe medication to help manage your mental health.



Remember:

- **Anxiety is common.** Nearly 1 in 3 young adults experience it.
- **Both anxiety and stress are treatable.**

WHERE TO LOOK FOR PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT:

- Ask for recommendations from friends and family if you feel comfortable, or ask for a referral from your primary care physician.
- Check out your insurance provider's "Find a Doctor" tool, lists from Psychology Today, or use your workplace's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if applicable.
- Consider community health centers, which often provide free or low-cost services.
- Look into local universities or graduate programs: some university clinics or centers are open to the public on a sliding scale or financial assistance program.
- Seek out text-based or online therapy options.



SUPPORT YOURSELF TO STRESS LESS

MANAGING STRESS IS

PERSONAL to each individual. But remembering what works for you when you are under stress may be difficult. It can be helpful to have a reminder on hand so that when you are in the moment, you can refer to your own steps to stress less.

STEPS TO STRESS LESS

■ **Identify what's causing you stress.**

If you are unable to identify what's causing you stress, it may be time to seek help from a professional. See page 8 for tips on seeking professional support.

■ **Review your symptoms of stress. (on page 7)**

■ **Think about what is in your control vs. out of your control.**

■ **Become aware of any internal self-talk.**

■ **Give yourself permission to take a break.**

■ **Reach out to a friend or family member.**

■ **Explore possibilities for reducing stress, such as:**

- | | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| ■ Move your body | ■ Check off simple tasks | ■ Carve out time for hobbies |
| ■ Take deep breaths | ■ Create your own self-care list | ■ Spend time outside |
| ■ Get adequate sleep | ■ Unplug from all electronics | ■ Create positive affirmations |
| ■ Set boundaries | ■ Cook a healthy meal | ■ Seek social support |
| ■ Plan ahead | ■ Stay hydrated | ■ Reframe thoughts |
| ■ Connect with others | | |
| ■ Celebrate small wins | | |

Reaching out to a friend or family member for support:

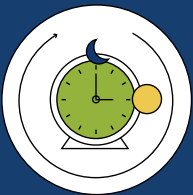
- Pick a friend, mentor, or family member you trust as the first person you tell.
- Choose a time and place where you will both feel comfortable.
- Let them know you are struggling and that you need to talk to someone.
- Share the V-A-R[®] tool (page 14) or tell them you just need a listening ear, if needed. The person's first inclination may be to problem-solve. It is OK to say that you just need someone to listen.
- It may feel awkward. That's OK. You're doing the right thing.
- Reassure them and yourself: It's okay to not be okay.

ACTIVITY: When you are experiencing stress, it can help to identify the stressor, your reaction, and your internal dialogue in order to promote stress relief. You can use the below chart to help pinpoint your stressors.

TIME OF STRESSOR	SYMPTOMS OF STRESS	ACTIVITIES BEFORE, DURING, OR AFTER STRESS RESPONSE	COPING MECHANISM	INTERNAL SELF-TALK

ABOVE ALL, SLEEP PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN HELPING US MANAGE OUR STRESS AND ANXIETY.

healthy sleep habits:



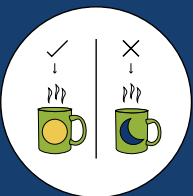
Try going to bed and waking up at the same time each day



Turn off all electronics at least 2 hours before bedtime



Follow a routine before you go to bed (reading, meditating, stretching, or breathing)



Avoid caffeine and other stimulants in the afternoon



Create an optimal sleeping space that is comfortable, dark, cool, & free of distractions



Be sure to talk to your doctor if you still persistently sleep too little or too much

CREATE A PERSONALIZED SELF-CARE TOOLBOX



SELF-CARE IS IMPORTANT for maintaining a healthy relationship with yourself. It means taking care of our minds and bodies by engaging in activities that promote well-being and stress reduction.

Taking good care of ourselves enhances our ability to live fully, vibrantly, and effectively. The practice of self-care reminds both you and others that your needs are valid and a priority.

Sometimes there is a stigma around the term "self-care" because it may be seen as selfish. It is important to know that self-care is not selfish; as the saying goes, you cannot pour from an empty cup.

JOURNALING ACTIVITY: Jot down a few thoughts that come to mind when you ask yourself the following questions:

- What type of activities or practices bring you joy, give you energy, or help you decompress?
- What do you do when you need a mental break?
- How do you feel after you engage in these activities?
- What areas of your life could you give more care to?
- When you think about the "8 Dimensions of Wellness", what is one that you would like to pay more attention to?



WHATEVER SELF-CARE

PRACTICES fit for you, it is paramount that we consistently engage in activities and habits in our lives that allow us to take a mental break. Just like our bodies need rest and recovery, so do our minds. Self-care can be simple, quick, free, and accessible activities - whatever gives our minds and bodies a breather.

SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

Choose one self-care practice to focus on this week. Below are some suggestions. You may want to journal about the practice and how it made you feel afterwards. Consider sharing your list with a friend and ask them what helps them when they are feeling stressed.

- Spend time in nature
- Read
- Cook/bake
- Set boundaries
- Walk
- Move your body
- Listen to music or a podcast
- Create art or music
- Garden
- Say "no"
- Ask for help
- Meditate
- Try breathing exercises
- Watch TV or a movie
- Call a friend
- Clean
- Play a game
- Take a nap
- Celebrate small wins
- Check off simple tasks
- Create a gratitude journal
- Dance
- Sing
- Stretch
- Snuggle your pet
- Organize
- Play video games
- Use affirmations
- Write down or read your favorite quotes
- Practice visualizations
- Take a day off
- Create a morning routine
- Journal

If you are someone who likes to schedule things into your day for accountability, start by choosing just one thing that you can do for yourself each day and put it on your calendar. Perhaps, you may also find it helpful to establish an accountability partner. All of these practices can reduce stress and support your mental health and wellbeing. Explore and find what works for you.



DAILY REMINDERS CHECKLIST



- Got enough **sleep**
- Took **deep breaths**
- Got **dressed** for the day
- Spent time **outside**
- Took a **shower**
- Drank enough **water**
- Had nourishing **meals**
- Connected with **friends** or **family**
- Unplugged from **social media** and **news**
- Moved** my body

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SUPPORT FRIENDS AND FAMILY TO STRESS LESS



A CONVERSATION CAN BE LIFE-CHANGING when experiencing stress. For many, we just need to feel supported. It can be challenging, though, to know exactly what to say when someone tells you they are stressed, having a difficult day, or are struggling with their mental health. It can also be challenging to know how to ask for the support that you need when you need it.

V-A-R® or Validate-Appreciate-Refer, empowers people to know what to say and do in those moments.

Remember:

We can also use V-A-R to support ourselves through stressful times. Affirmations and validating self-talk can go a long way to ease stress. Try not to rush to fix the situation for yourself. Rather, take time to process why you might be stressed. Show gratitude for yourself for slowing down and give yourself time to breath. Think about what helps you during these stressful moments and do your best to engage in self-care.

THE THREE V-A-R® STEPS

are a helpful guide to listening and responding in a meaningful way. You can also let other people know about V-A-R® so that their conversations with you are also rooted in active listening skills and validation. Validation can make all the difference in the world during a stressful time.



VALIDATE



APPRECIATE



REFER

VALIDATE their feelings.

Let them know that what they're feeling is okay and that you believe them. When someone reaches out to you, validate their feelings and acknowledge that whatever they are going through is okay. Even if you cannot relate with what they are going through, it's real to them.

VALIDATION SOUNDS LIKE...

- "That makes sense."
- "That sounds difficult."
- "You have a lot on your plate."
- "I believe you."
- "I hear you."

APPRECIATE their courage.

Speaking up can be a challenging step — let them know it's a good one. You can use this opportunity to let them know you care and they're not alone.

APPRECIATE SOUNDS LIKE...

- "Thank you for sharing."
- "Thank you for being open with me."
- "I'm here for you if you want to talk or need anything."
- "You are not alone."
- "It helps to know what you're going through."

REFER them to skills and support.

Let them know that help is available and refer them to appropriate resources. Sometimes what a person needs is a listening ear and social connection. Sometimes they will need more. You can help them to figure out what will work best for them in this moment. Notice that "Refer" is best when posed as a question.

REFER SOUNDS LIKE...

- "What makes you feel truly cared for?"
- "What's one thing that would make a big difference for you right now, in this moment?"
- "Do you think it might be helpful to talk to someone? I can go with you."
- "Do you want to make plans to go on a run together tomorrow?"

CONNECT WITH ACTIVE MINDS



SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES AND IMAGES

Head to activeminds.org/SLW-graphics to download images to promote Stress Less Week.



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Active Minds is the nation's leading nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults. Active Minds has a presence in more than 800 colleges, universities, high schools, workplaces and communities. The organization is dedicated to ending the silence and changing the conversation about mental health for everyone.

To learn more, visit [activeminds.org](https://www.activeminds.org).

THIS GUIDE IS MADE POSSIBLE BY **just.**
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