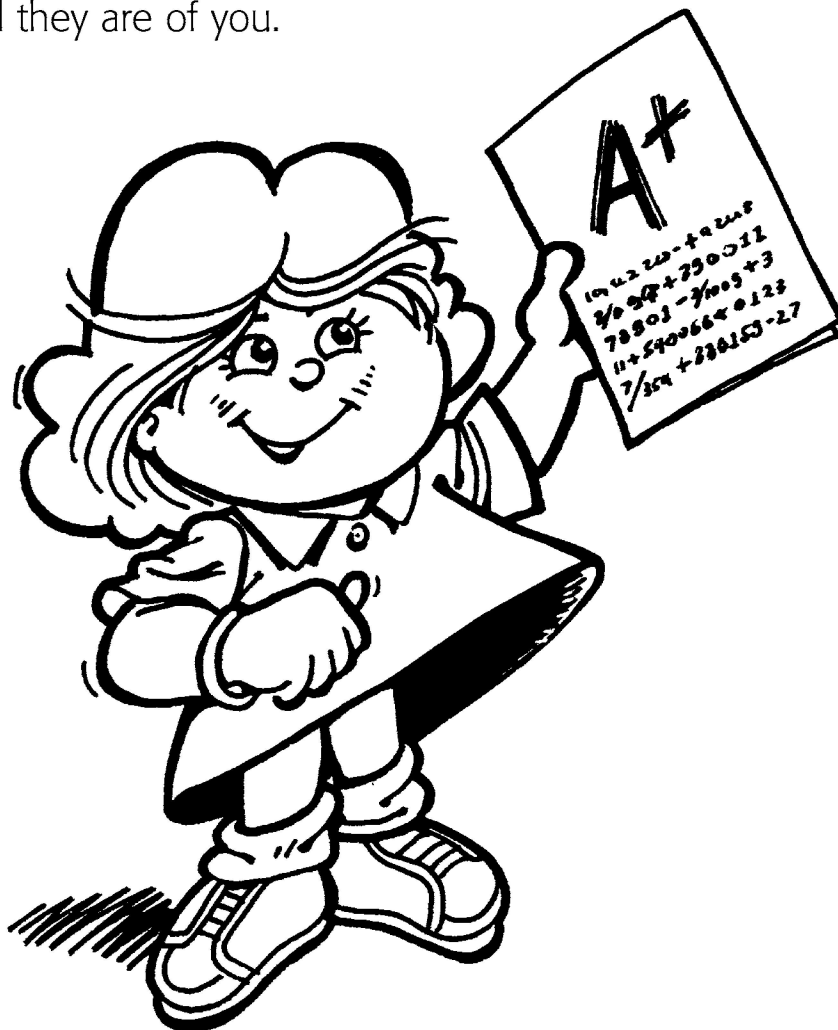


WHAT IS STRESS?

.....

Some days, everything seems to go your way. Everything happens just as you wish. You get an "A" on a test. You're popular. You have fun with your brother or sister. You're elected captain of the team. Your parents tell you how proud they are of you.



On these days, you can handle just about anything.

But then, there are those other days, when life seems pretty tough. Nothing seems to go your way. You get a low grade on a test. Your best friend ignores you on the bus. You don't get to play on the team you want to be on. You fight with your brother or sister. And your parents get angry with you.



On those days, you may feel angry, sad, grouchy—or all three!

On those days, *just one more thing* might be too much to handle.

On those hard days, you are feeling STRESS!



Stress is invisible. Nobody can see it. But when it gets really bad, you can definitely see its effects.

Some people say that stress makes them feel like they are being **STRETCHED** too far.



Imagine you had clay and you rolled it into a fat snake. Then you took each end of the snake and pulled until the snake became thinner and thinner. Eventually, it would break. That's how it feels sometimes when you are stressed.

Some people say that stress feels like they are being hit over the head with a hammer. Others say that angry feelings make them feel like they are going to explode into a hundred pieces.

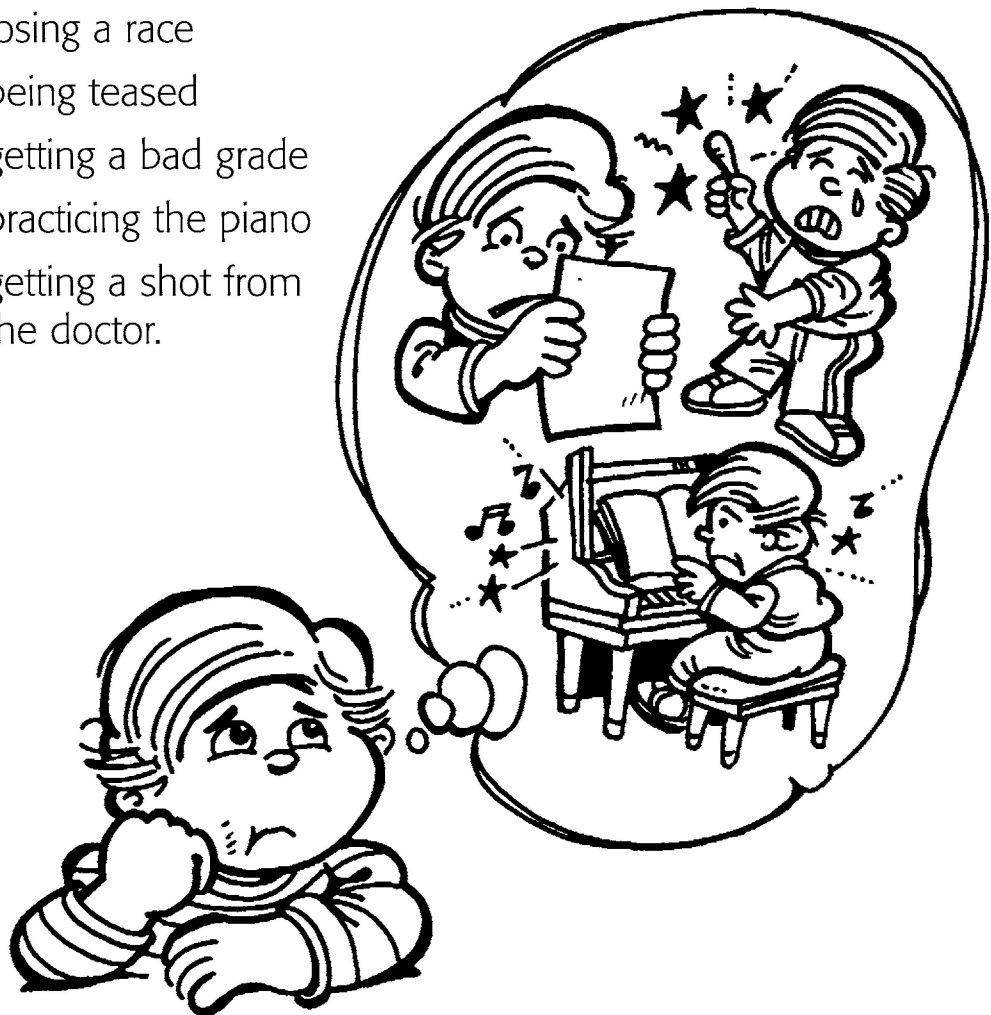
Some people think that if they can be strong enough or tough enough or cool enough, then stress won't bother them. But they are wrong. *Everyone* feels stress, and everyone gets angry at times—tall people, short people, rich people, poor people, kids, parents, teachers, doctors, cowboys—everyone.



Anger and stress can come from two directions: from *outside* you and from *inside* you.

Here are some of the things from the outside that can cause you to feel stressed:

- getting your fingers caught in a door
- losing a race
- being teased
- getting a bad grade
- practicing the piano
- getting a shot from the doctor.

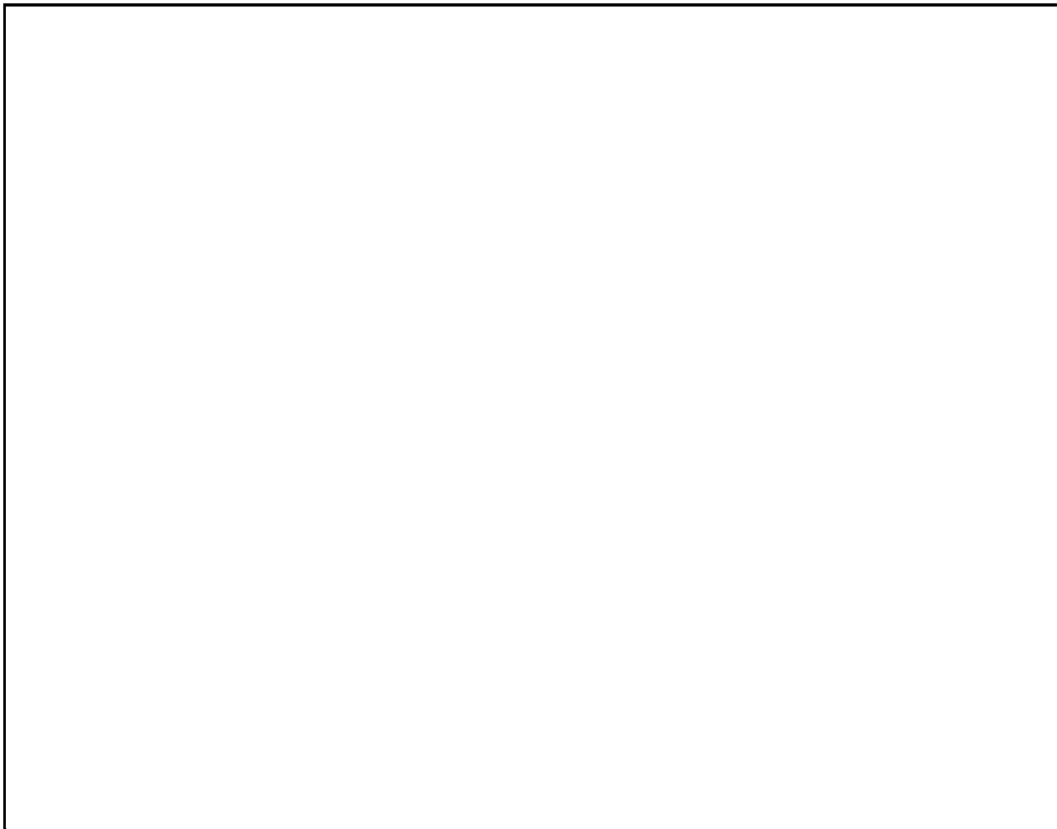


Can you think of three things from the outside that made you feel stressed this week?

Try to picture in your mind someone (or something) from the outside that causes you stress. For example:

- your big sister
- homework
- a bully
- someone in the house who yells a lot

Draw that person or thing in the space below. Don't worry about how good your drawing is. Just get something down on paper. Color it in, if you like.



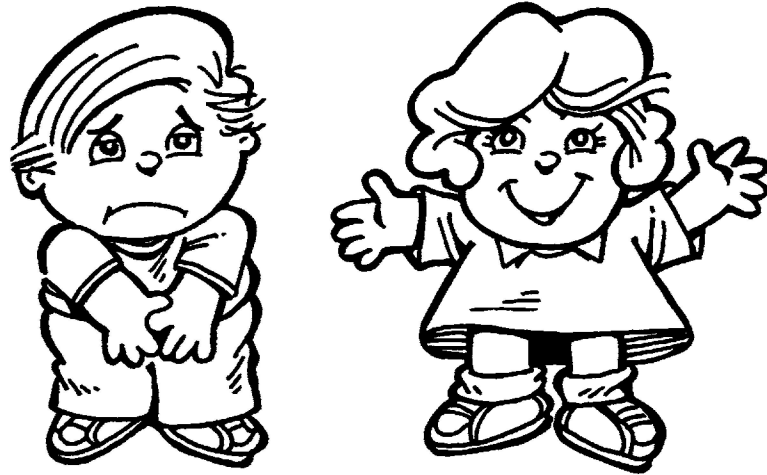
Stress can also come from the inside—from your feelings. Here are some feelings that can make you feel stressed:

- being angry at your best friend
- being ashamed about something you said
- feeling sad because someone you care about is not around
- being jealous of the way another kid looks
- being afraid of the big dog in your neighbor's yard.

Can you think of a time when you were really stressed because of the way you felt?



Feelings come from the inside, but they show on the outside. When someone is sad, happy, mad, or afraid, you usually know it.



Can you draw some faces that show these emotions? Again, don't worry about how good your drawing is. Have fun with it.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE STRESS?



Often, we don't even know when we are feeling stress. Sometimes we get so used to feeling stress that we think that feeling bad is just normal. But once you know about stress, there are lots of ways to tell if you, or someone you know, is "stressed out."

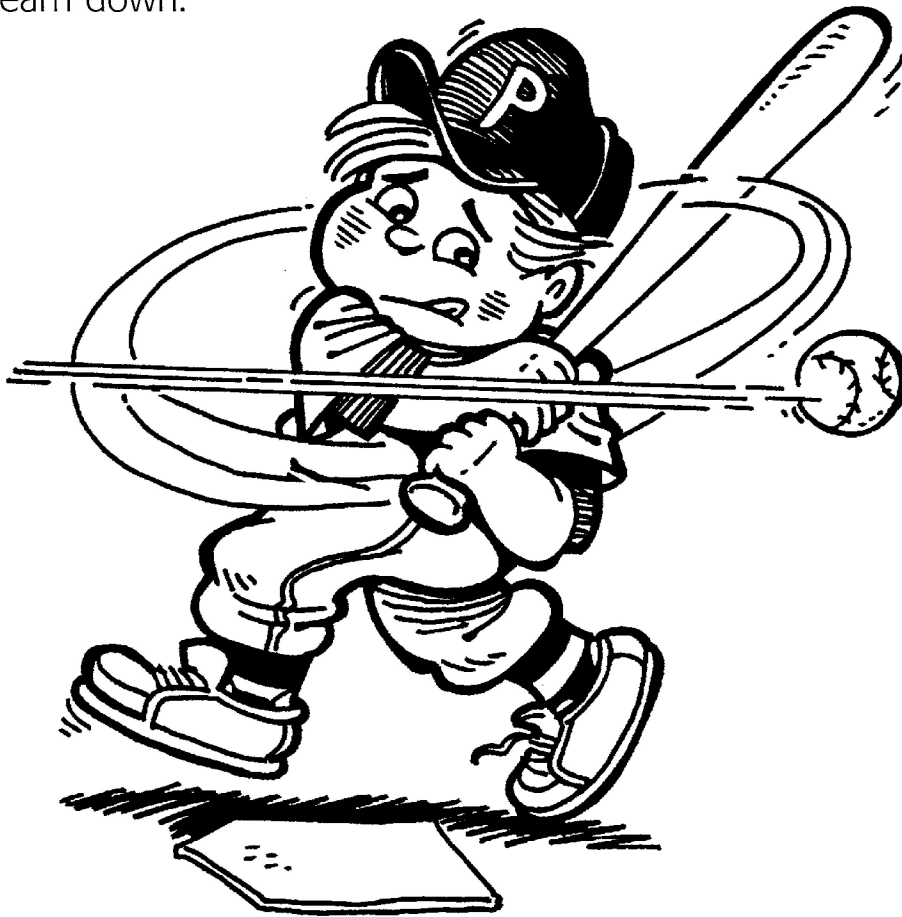


There are three important things that can tell you that you have stress:

1. Your feelings.
2. The way your body looks and feels.
3. Your behavior.

Everyone has many different feelings. Some feelings make us feel good, and some feelings make us feel bad.

The feelings that make us feel bad can be caused by stress. When people feel stress, they can be *afraid*, *irritable*, *angry*, *tired*, *sad*, or many other things. For example, if you keep striking out at baseball every time you go to bat, you may feel *embarrassed* that people saw you fail, or you may feel *guilty* because you let your team down.



Not being good enough at something is a stress that we all know. After all, nobody's perfect. Our bad feelings tell us that we are under stress.

If you can put a name to your feelings, then you can probably figure out why you feel that way, and you can change those feelings. Changing negative feelings to positive feelings is one way to deal with stress.



These are some of the feelings and examples of those feelings that can tell you that you are stressed:



Guilty: Mike knows he should not have stolen that candy bar.

Pressured: Amanda never has any time to do her homework.

Hurried: Bob is always late for the school bus.

Shame: Ralph is ashamed of the way he talked back to his mother.

Feeling Unimportant: Sam feels that he isn't as good as his big brother.

Frustrated: Dan doesn't play basketball very well, but he loves to play anyway.

Overwhelmed: Sally doesn't understand her math homework.

Bored: Barbara hates practicing the piano.



Can you think of some things that these kids could do to change their negative feelings into positive ones? You can write them down if you want to.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Do you have any feelings right now that are telling you that you are stressed? What are they? What can you do about them?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Playing is an important way for kids (and grown-ups) to deal with stress. Play helps us express ourselves, relieve tension, take our mind off things...and it's fun!

Sometimes you can look at someone who is playing and see that they are working off stress. People who play sports can often work off their stress on the field. Board games, card games, or hobbies can relieve stress by focusing our minds on something more calming.

Play can also help us deal with stress because it encourages us to be creative and imaginative.

Build something. You can use blocks or clay or books or dominoes. Make a scary monster out of felt or a paper bag. Creating something out of raw materials can be a great way to relieve stress. Below, draw a picture of what you would like to build.



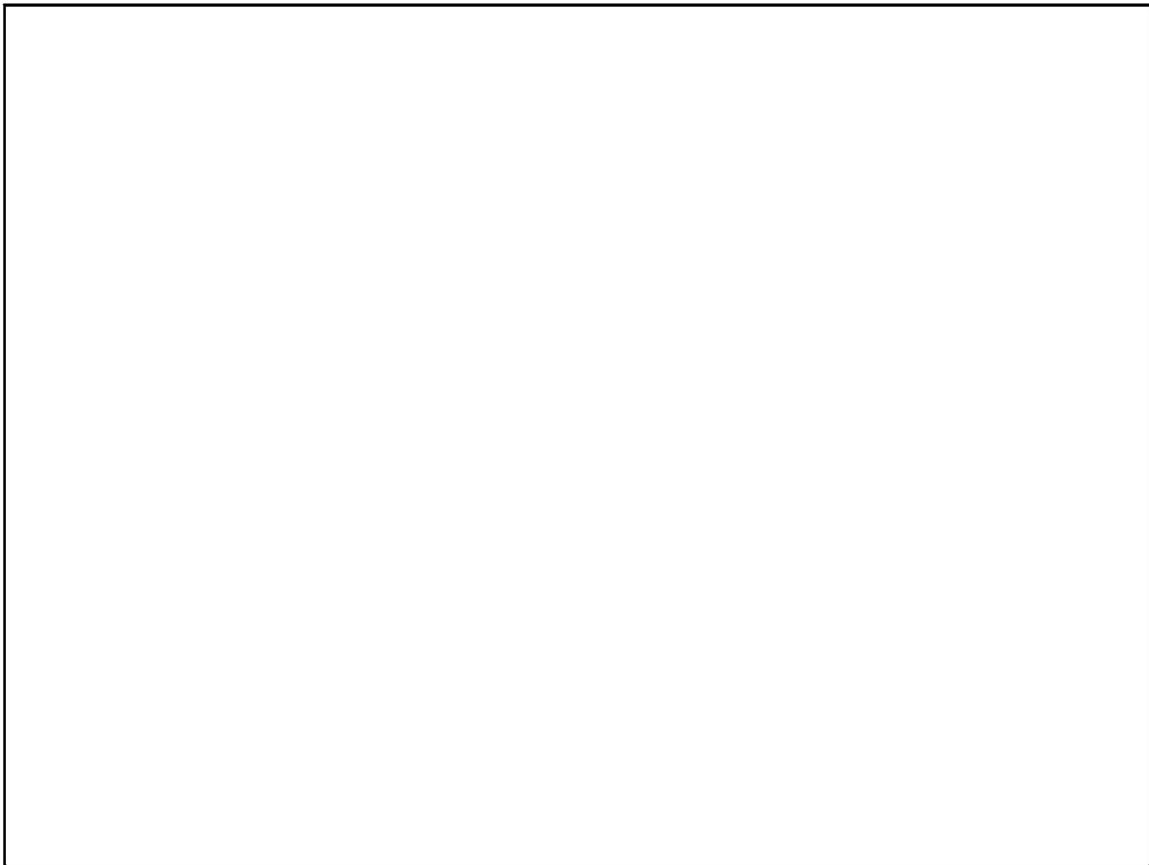
Stress can be moderate or intense. When you are under a moderate amount of stress, you may start to notice different things about yourself. You may seem more tired than usual, or you may have trouble falling asleep. You may feel cranky or irritable. You may not have much energy, or you may be very, very active.



When you are under a lot of stress, your body lets you know. It can:

- hurt and give you headaches or stomach aches;
- make your heart beat very, very fast, so that it feels like it is pounding in your chest;
- make you breathe very fast, so that you feel like you can't catch your breath.

Below, draw a picture of yourself under stress.



When they were asked what made them feel like they were under a lot of stress, this is what some kids said:

“When I had to go to the hospital and have an operation.”

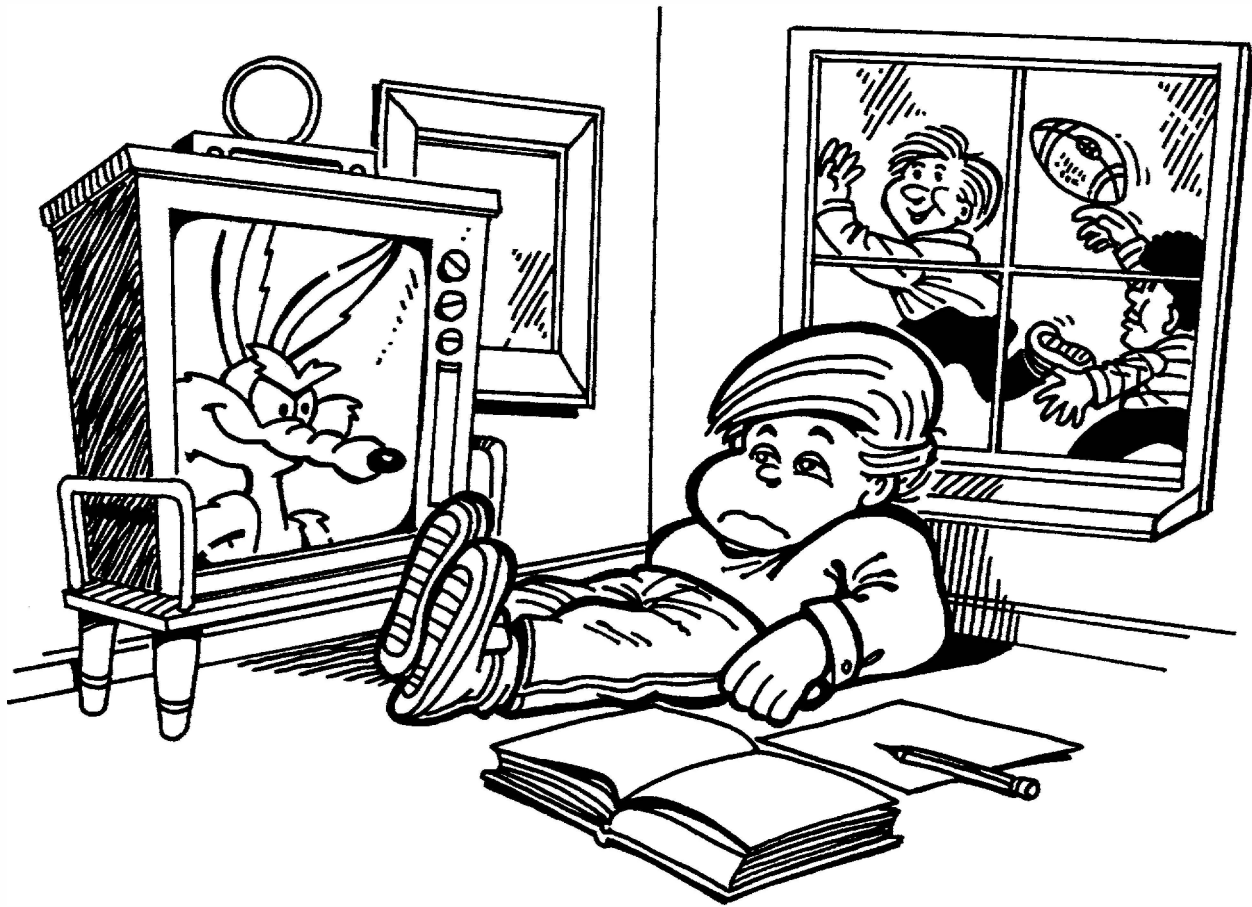
“When my uncle died and I went to his funeral.”

“When my teacher made me stand up in front of the whole class and tell them that I had taken Marty’s money.”

Can you think of some times when you were under a lot of stress?



Our behavior (the things we do) can tell us that we are under stress. For example, sometimes when kids are under stress they do things they might not normally do.



Sometimes they watch more TV. or play more video games.

Sometimes they don't play with their friends.

Sometimes they can't concentrate on their homework.

Most of the time it's hard for kids to see that they are acting differently because of stress. But other people may notice the difference.

Here are some things that grownups have noticed about kids who were under stress:

"Danny was very quiet in class all of a sudden."

"Chantal didn't pay any attention when her mom talked to her."

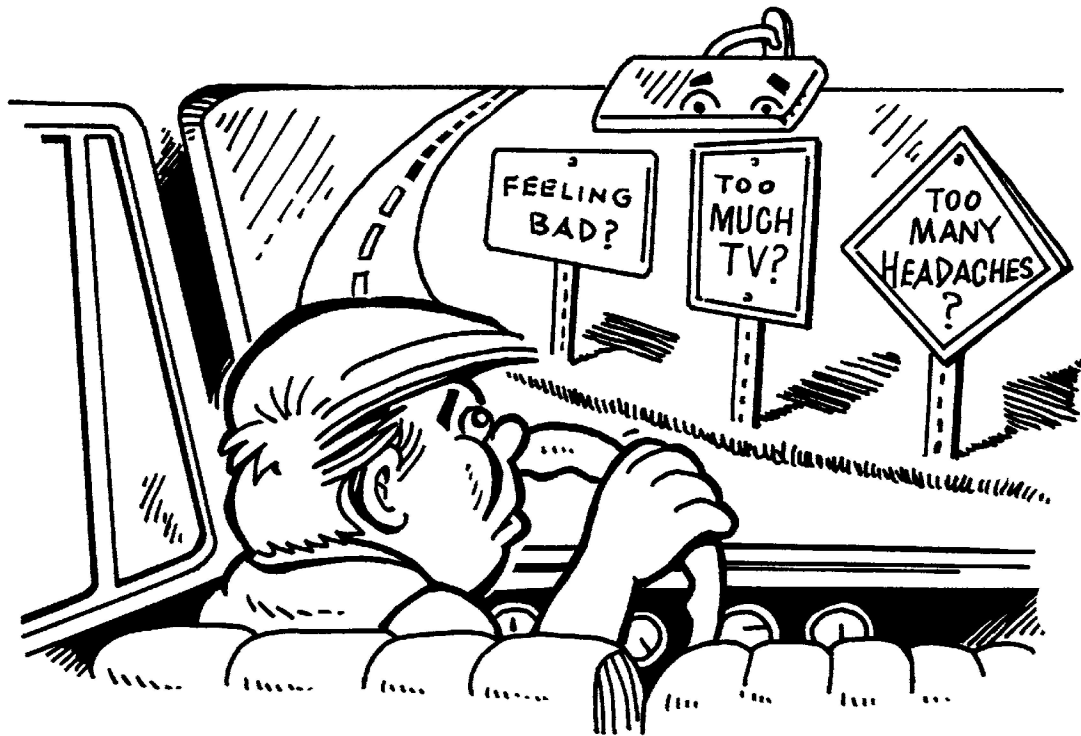
"José didn't want to see any of his friends."

"Karen didn't seem to want to talk to her parents about anything."

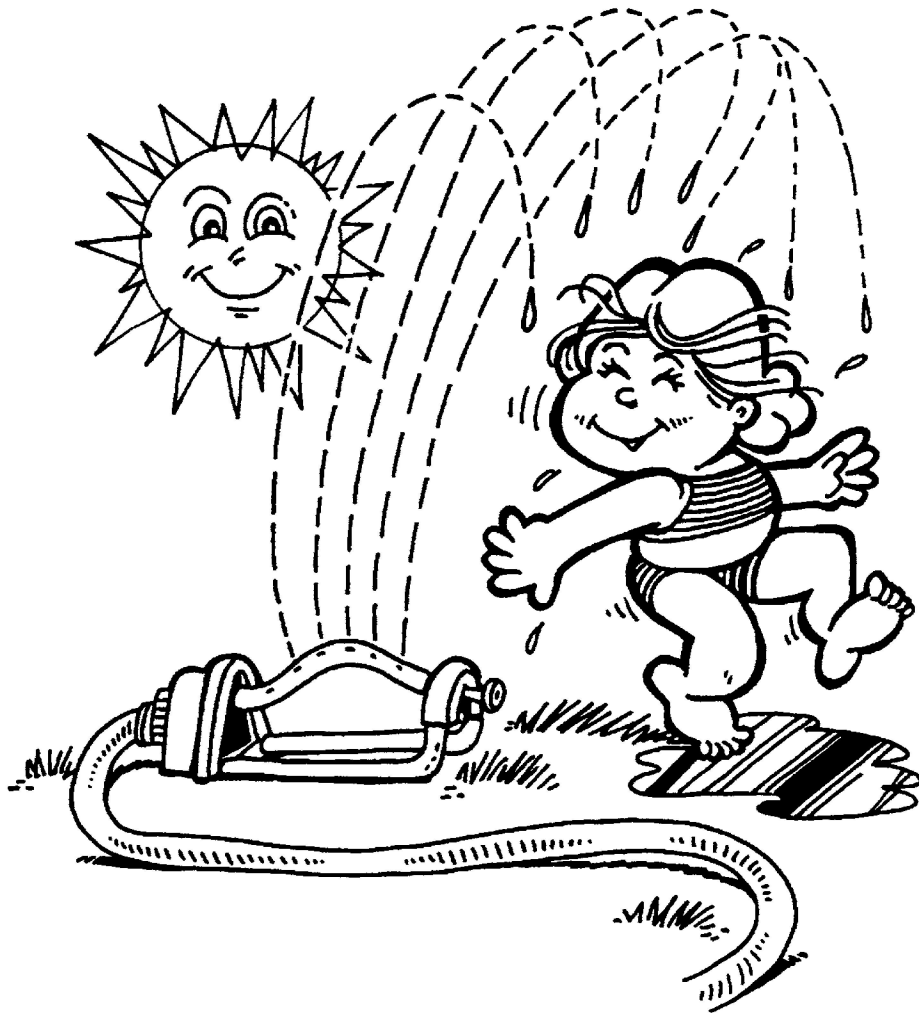
LEARNING TO DEAL WITH STRESS



Now you know that stress is a part of life that affects everyone. You know the signs of stress and that these signs can be warning signals, just the way signs on the road can be warning signals.



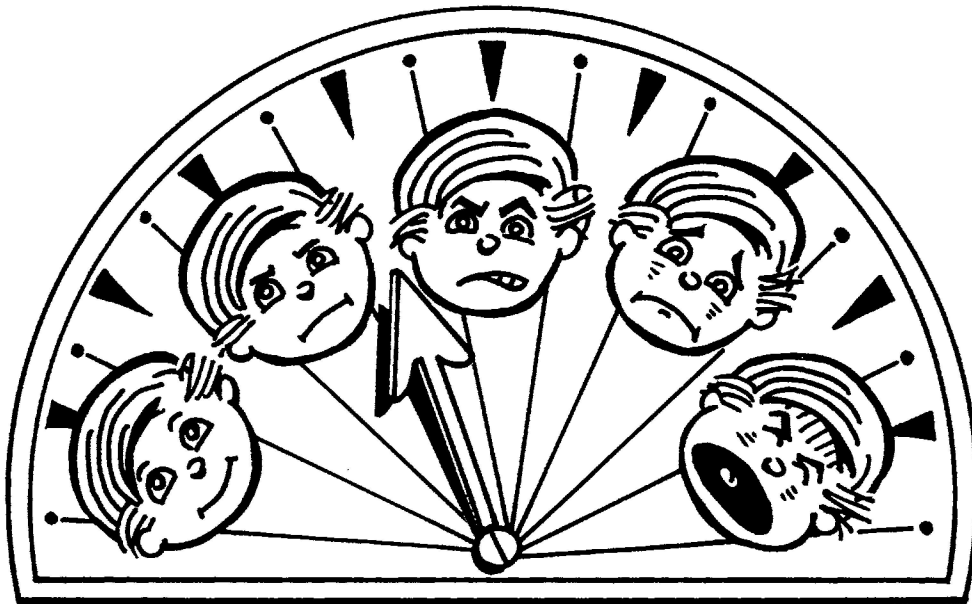
Now it is time to learn *how* to deal with stress; to learn how to *cope* with it. When you learn to cope with something, you learn to adjust to it in a positive way.



For example, when it is very hot outside, you wear cool clothing and you stay out of the sun. When you can, you take a swim or run under the sprinkler. That's coping with the heat. You can't make the heat go away (although it will eventually), so you learn to adjust to it.

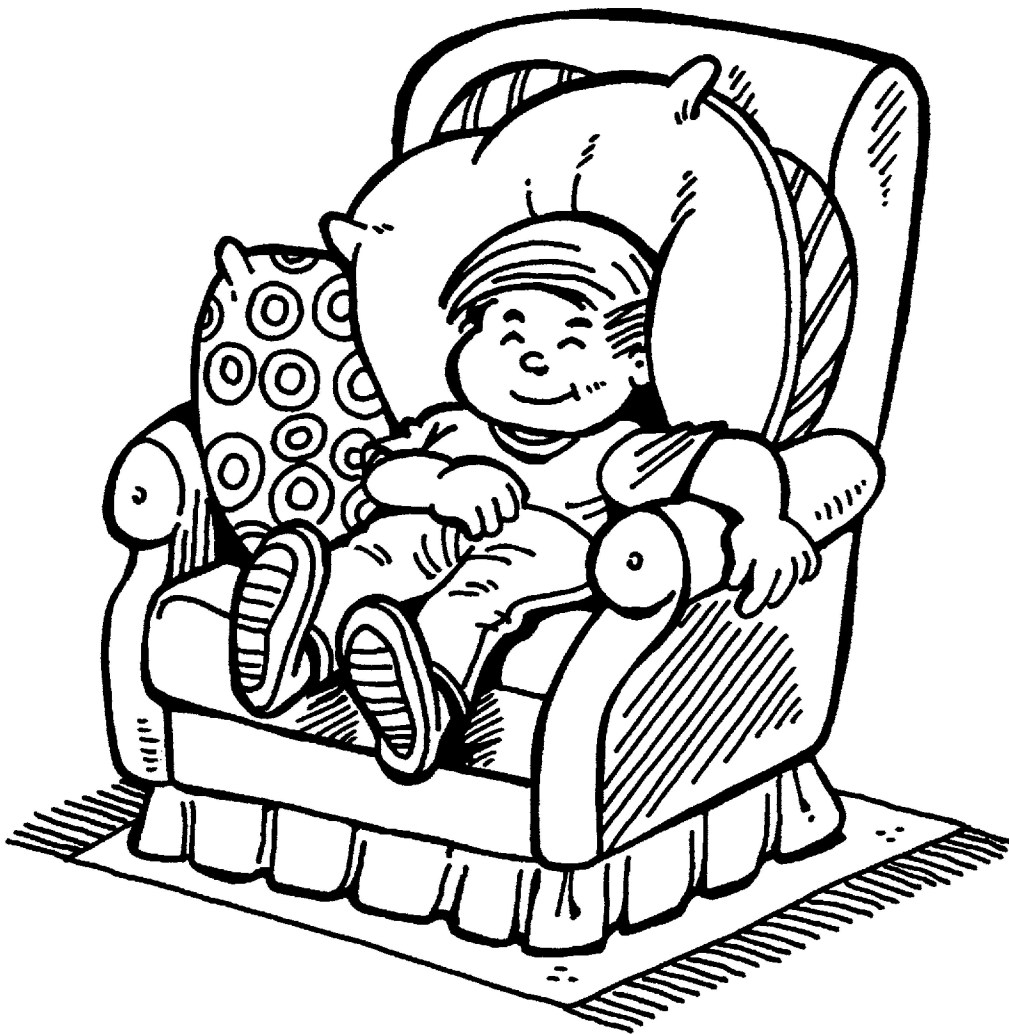
Probably the best way to cope with stress is to learn to relax.
Really relax.

Relaxing when you are feeling stress is like going into an air-conditioned room when it is hot outside. It helps you cope *right away*, and it makes your "stress meter" go down for a long time afterwards. (My stress meter, as you can see, is going down as I write this.)



But relaxing when you are under stress is not as easy as it sounds. It takes some practice.

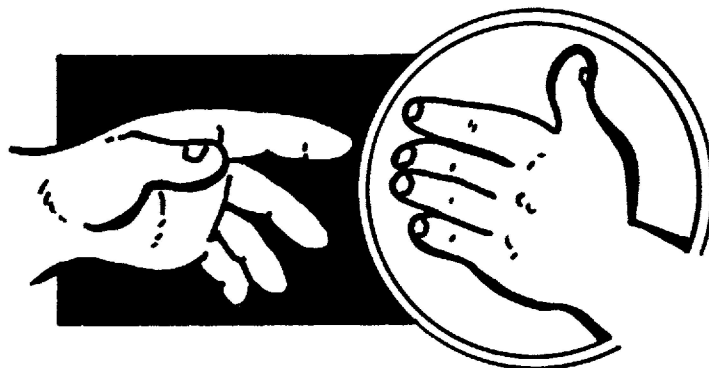
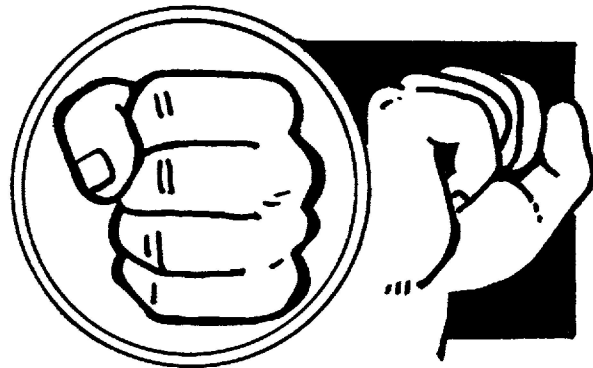
Begin by sitting down in a comfortable chair or on a soft carpet surrounded by pillows.



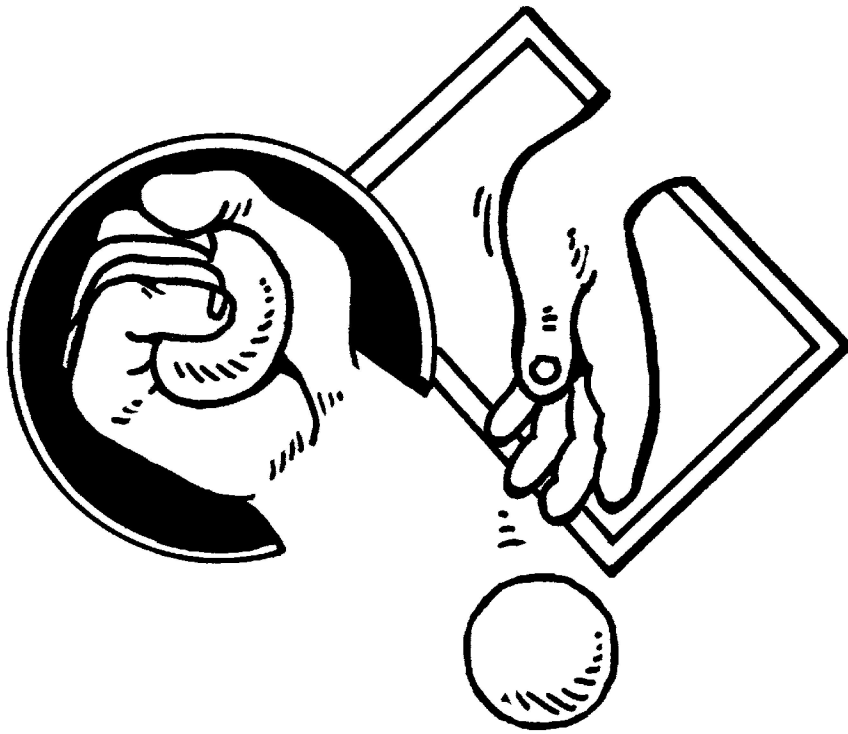
The next thing to do may seem funny, because it is the opposite of being relaxed. Try your hardest to be tense, to tighten your muscles as hard as you can.

Clench your fists very tightly.
Now let go, and open your hands.

Notice how your hands feel now.
They are more relaxed than when you began.



Practice tensing and relaxing using a squishy ball. Squeeze it as tightly as you can in your fist. Now relax your hand completely, so that the ball just flops right out of it.



To learn to completely relax, you must practice tensing and relaxing one part of your body at a time. When you tense, count to 10 slowly. When you relax, count to 20 slowly.

• • • • • • • • • •

FOR YOUR HEAD

Make the scariest face you can.
Now let it go and relax your face.

FOR YOUR ARMS

Stretch them out like you are going to fly. Hold your arms steady and tighten all your muscles. Now bring your arms down to your sides and let them rest there, like they are bags of heavy sand.

FOR YOUR BODY

Squeeze everything at once, like you are a ball of clay and someone is squeezing you! Now let all your muscles go at once and go limp, like you are a big, floppy rag doll.

FOR YOUR LEGS AND FEET

Hold your legs up off the ground as long as you can.
Scrunch your toes at the same time. Now let go and let your feet flop down, like they are heavy weights.

• • • • • • • • • •

Some kids have difficulty learning to tense and relax their bodies. If you can, get someone to help you tense and relax one part of your body at a time.

Here is another thing that you can do to help you relax. It is very easy because you do it all the time...breathe!



When you are tense, you automatically take shorter breaths. Just like when you are running very hard, when your body is tense it tries to get a lot of fresh oxygen by breathing quickly.

Taking a super-deep breath or two is the fastest way to slow down and relax. When you breathe *deeply* and *slowly*, it also helps you relax your muscles.

Let's do it now...

Breathe in as much air as you can. Imagine that your lungs are balloons, and fill them up. Hold the air for about six seconds (counting very slowly).

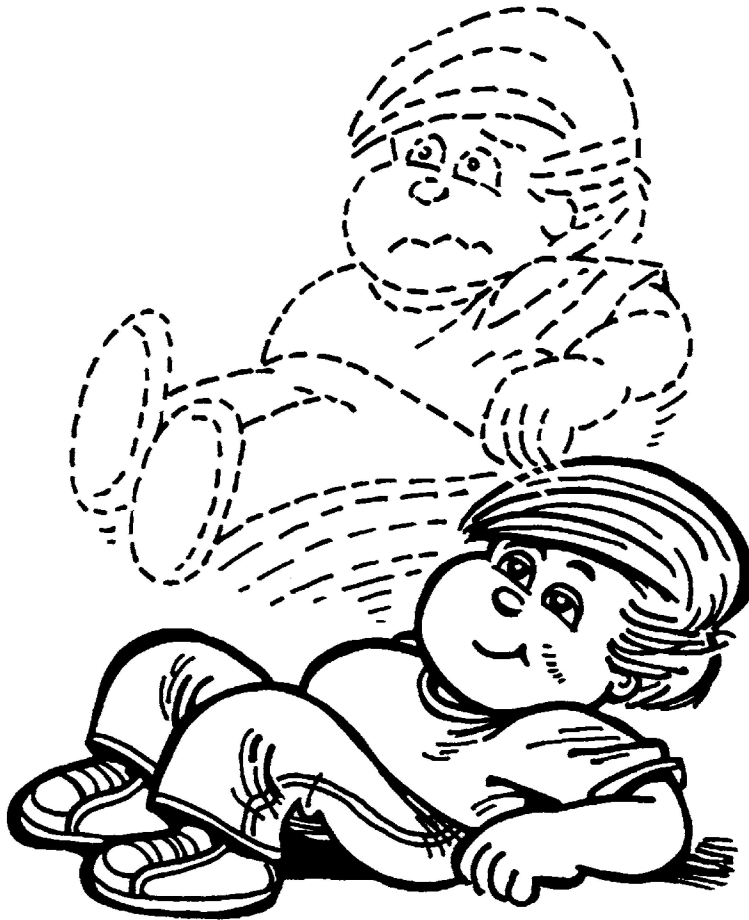


And then let it out.

Very slowly, let the balloon deflate, until all the air is out.



Now breathe normally again. Can you tell the difference?



Now try it again. Take a very deep breath, fill your chest up with air, like a balloon. Now hold the air in for six seconds...

Let it out slowly. Let your body relax.

Can you feel the stress floating away?

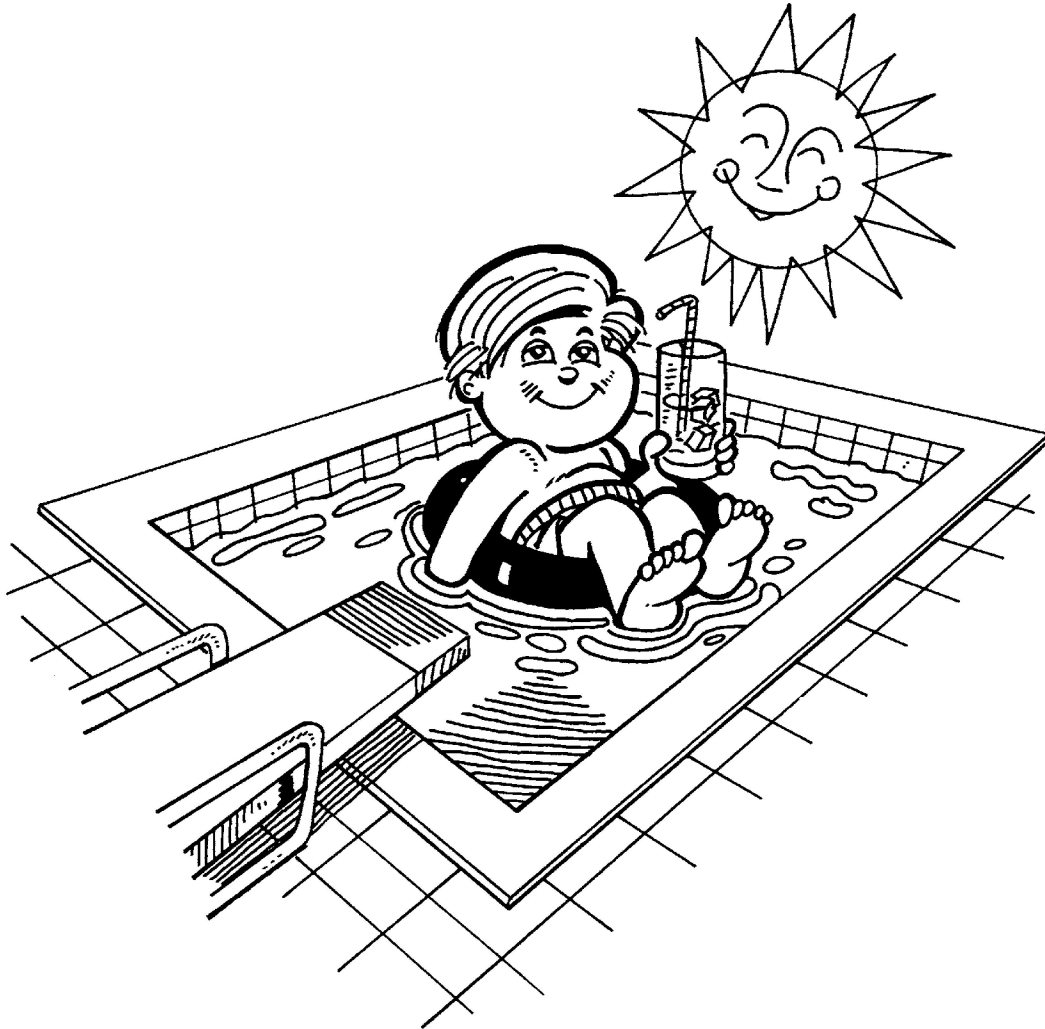
There's one more trick to learning to relax and get rid of stress.

Just like relaxing your body, and like breathing, you already know how to do this. It's called IMAGINATION!

Imagination is like making a picture in your mind. You probably do this all the time.

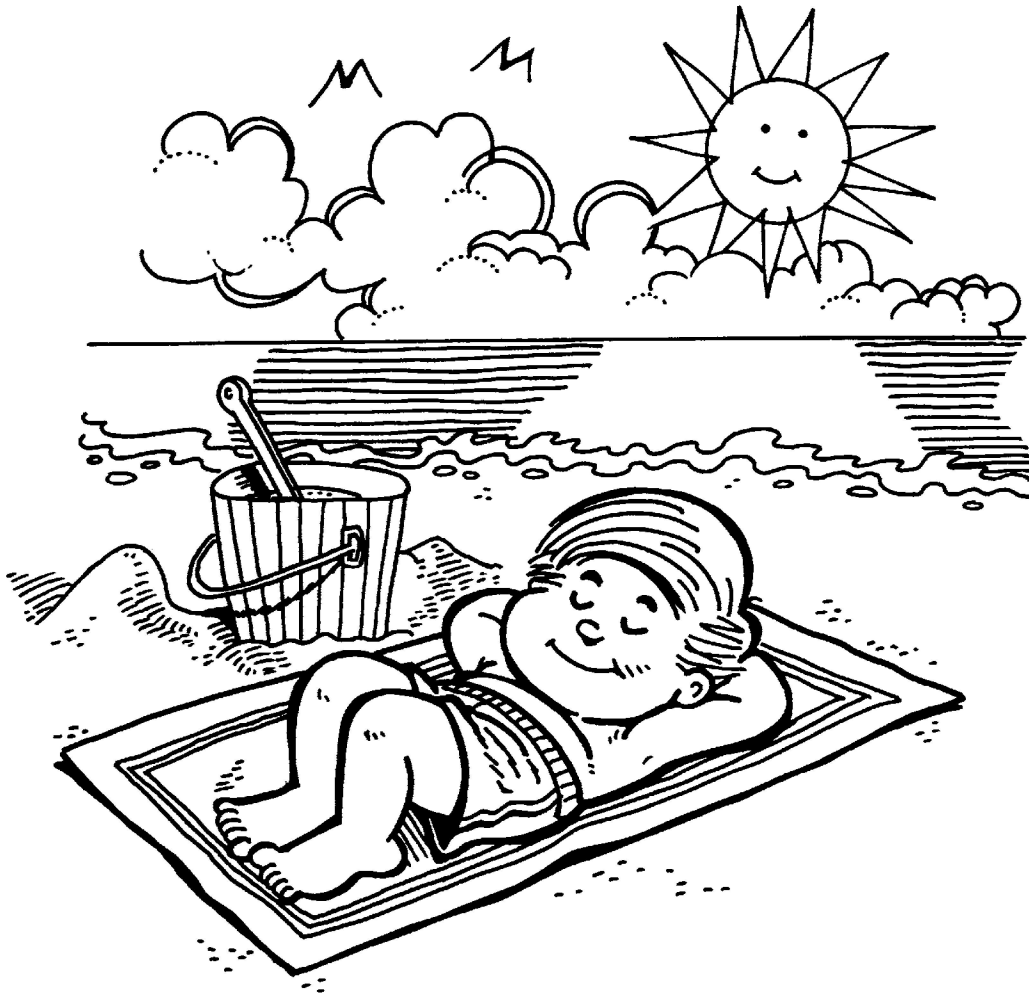


When you imagine a picture of yourself relaxing in your mind, your level of stress actually goes down. The more you concentrate on seeing yourself relaxed, the more you actually feel relaxed.



Close your eyes and try to imagine yourself relaxing...on the beach, floating in a pool—whatever feels good to you.

See yourself on the beach again.
Can you feel the warm sand?
Can you smell the salt air?
Can you hear the sea gulls?



Really concentrate. Does it almost seem like you are there? Take a very deep breath now and, as you let it out, feel very relaxed.

You can imagine yourself anywhere you like that is calm and peaceful. How about lying in a big park, looking up at the clouds?



What does it feel like? What do you hear?
What do you smell?

Many people use imagination to help them relax.
These are some of the things that people imagine:

- floating on a cloud;
- sitting in a room full of warm, golden light;
- floating away in a big balloon.



There is one more thing that you can do to help yourself relax anytime you like. Talk to yourself!

Say things that make you feel good, peaceful, and calm. Tell yourself:

"I feel very calm."

"I love myself."

"My mind is peaceful and clear."

"I am a special person."

"My parents and friends love me."

"I can solve my own problems."

All four of these things can help you relax and cope with stress. But the best way to relax and deal with stress is to use them all together!



Try this: Find a comfortable chair that reclines or put some pillows on the floor to lie down on.

Relax all the muscles in your body. First tighten and relax the muscles in your face, your arms, your body, your legs.

Now relax all the muscles in your body so that it feels heavy but good.

Take a very deep breath, hold it in, and let it out very slowly.

Now do it again and, as you let the air out, feel yourself becoming more and more relaxed.

Close your mind and think of yourself in a very relaxing place. Concentrate on it very hard. See if you can hear, smell, and feel what that place is like.



Now that you are very relaxed, say some things that will make you feel good about yourself.

Some kids are under more stress than others.

Listed below are a few situations that cause stress for kids:

- Kids whose parents are getting divorced are under a lot of stress.
- Kids who have an illness or who are dealing with a death in the family are under a lot of stress.
- Kids who have trouble in school are under a lot of stress.

If you are under a lot of stress, then you should practice these relaxation exercises every day.

Learning to relax is like learning almost anything. The more you practice, the better you will be at it.

If you practice these relaxation exercises you can learn to relax very quickly, even if you are under a lot of stress...even if you are waiting to get a shot from the doctor...even if you are about to take a test...even if you are about to sing a song in front of the whole school. And so on.

Just say to yourself, *I can relax*. Take a deep breath, and feel relaxed just the way you practiced.



LIVING A LOW-STRESS LIFE



Relaxing is an important way to deal with the stress that you are feeling right now. But there are things you can do every day to keep your stress level at a low level all the time.

First, you have to take good care of yourself.



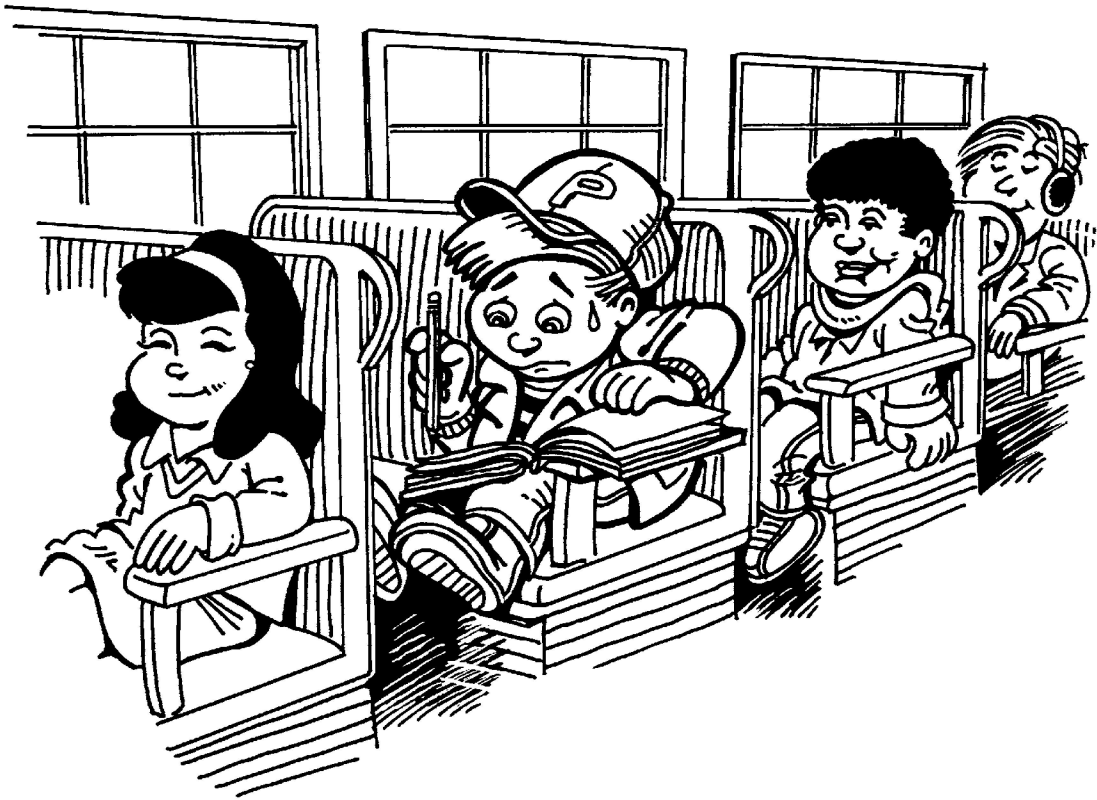
You wouldn't want to be like Tim. Tim wakes up late for school every day. Some days he has a donut for breakfast, and some days he doesn't eat anything. Usually he hasn't finished his homework, so he has to do it on the school bus.

He watches TV all the time and stays up as late as he can.

He hates fruits and vegetables and eats candy and snack food between meals.

He likes to play video games, and he doesn't go outside or exercise unless someone makes him do it.

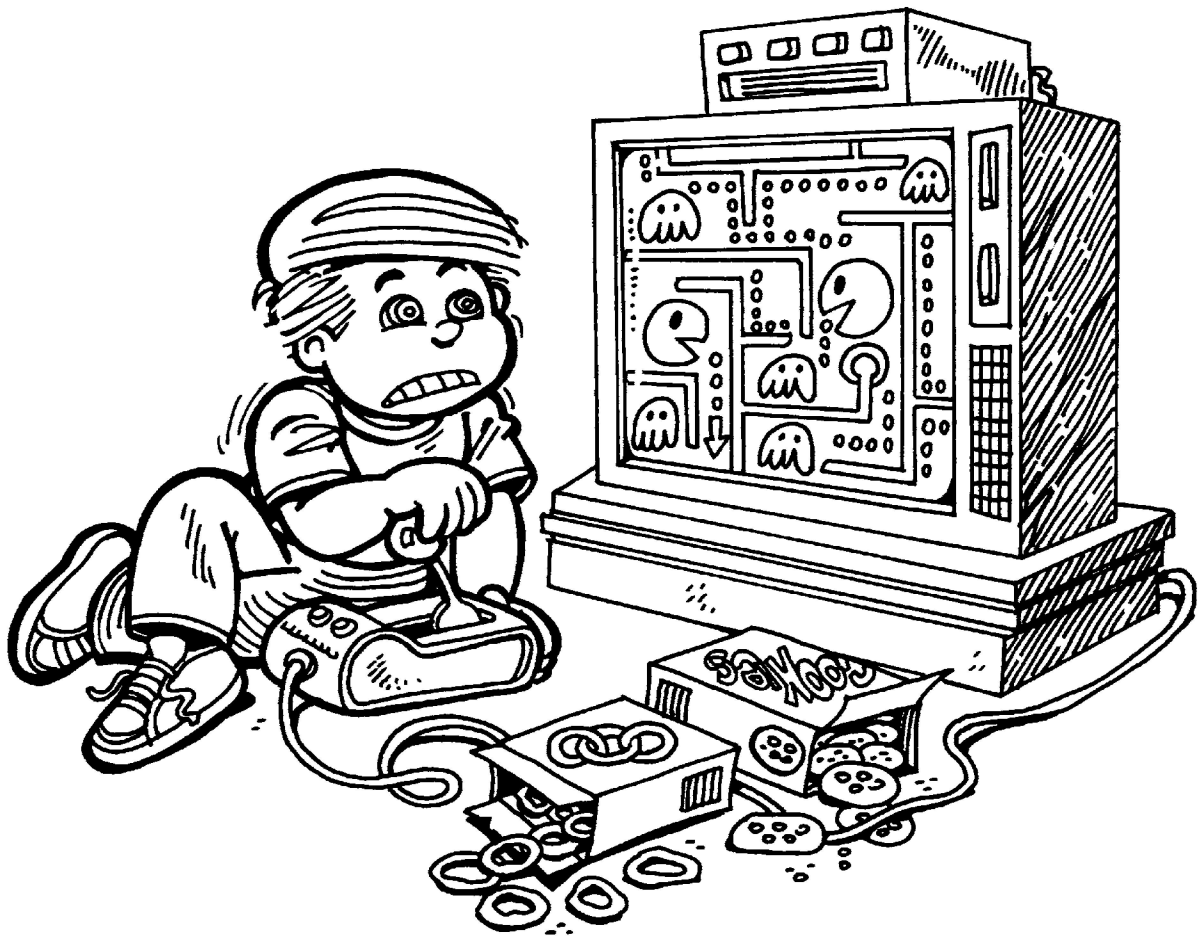
Tim is leading a high-stress life.



Eating a lot of sugary food and snack foods makes your body feel stressed.

Watching TV and playing video games for hours every day makes your mind feel stressed.

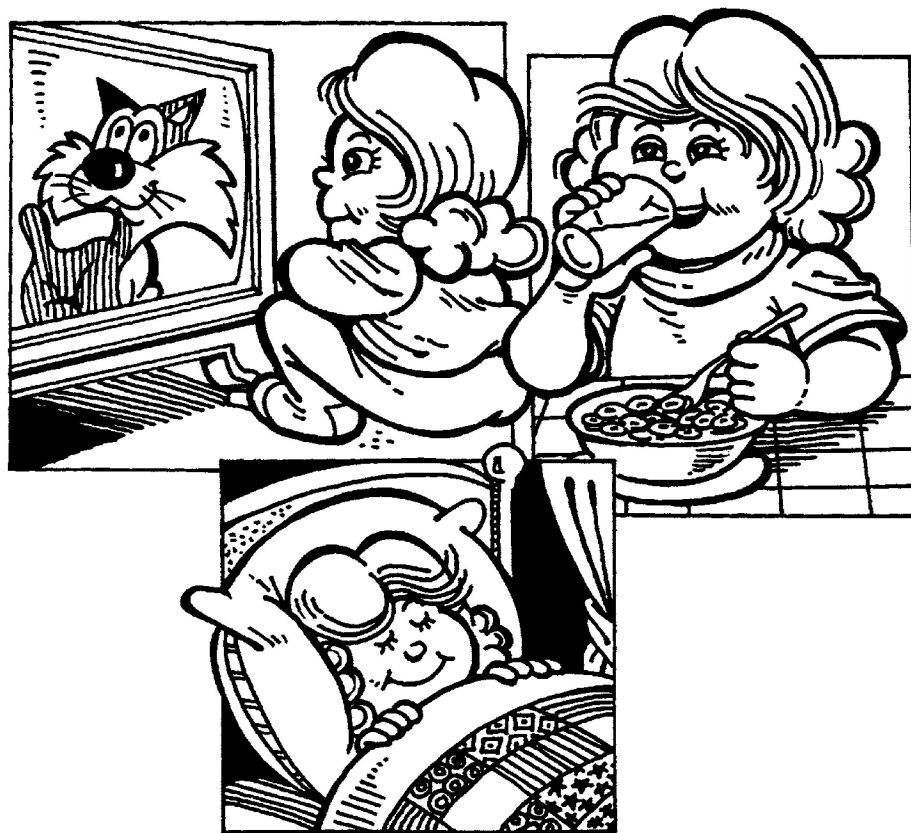
Staying up late and rushing around all the time causes a lot of stress.



It's better to be more like Cathy, who sets her alarm the night before, dresses herself quickly in the morning, eats a healthy breakfast, and still has enough time to be at the bus stop to talk to her friends.

After school, she gets her homework done, plays with her friends or goes to an after-school activity, eats dinner with her family, and watches a little TV before bed. When she's tired, she goes to sleep, even if it's *before* her bedtime.

Cathy is leading a low-stress life, and she feels great!



You can lead a low-stress life if you remember:

Good nutrition helps the body work well.

Getting enough rest helps the body work well.

Getting exercise helps the body work well.

Being organized and responsible helps you not to be rushed.

This book has helped you learn a bit about stress—what it is, how to recognize it, how to deal with it, and how to live a low-stress lifestyle. You've learned that being stressed-out isn't fun at all, and being relaxed and happy with your life feels a lot better.

You've got the ability to choose what's best for you.

So take a deep breath, stay cool under pressure, and choose wisely.