

# FIGHTING INVISIBLE TIGERS

4TH EDITION  
REVISED & UPDATED

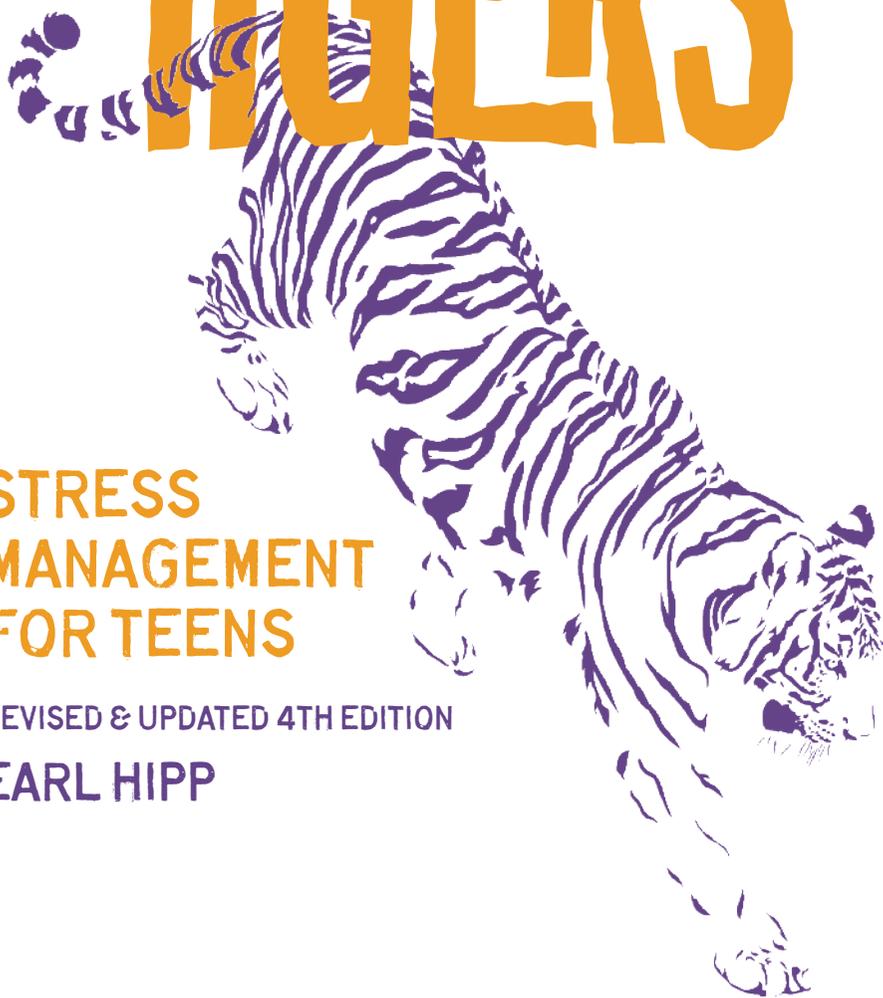
EARL HIPPI

STRESS  
MANAGEMENT  
FOR TEENS

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# FIGHTING INVISIBLE TIGERS



## STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR TEENS

REVISED & UPDATED 4TH EDITION

EARL HIPPI

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PUBLISHING®



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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to all young people who are fighting invisible tigers without help or support.

## Acknowledgments

Writing is only one part of bringing a book into the world. It takes a publisher who “gets it,” contributors, editors, artists, printers, and office and warehouse people, all doing their parts to bring this book into being and into your hands. I want to thank this whole crew for their special skills and contributions. You are all playing important roles in helping young people deal with the stress in their lives.

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**All the young people** who took the risk to share the hard and fun parts of their lives. Their honest quotes in this book will help other kids feel less alone with their invisible tigers.

**My caring friends** who together make up my Safety Net of Support. You make it easier to take the risk of putting myself out in the world.

**All my family, including my wife, Gwen**, for her unselfish support, and Clara and Naomi, two of my youth editors, for their teen and tween-age perspectives.

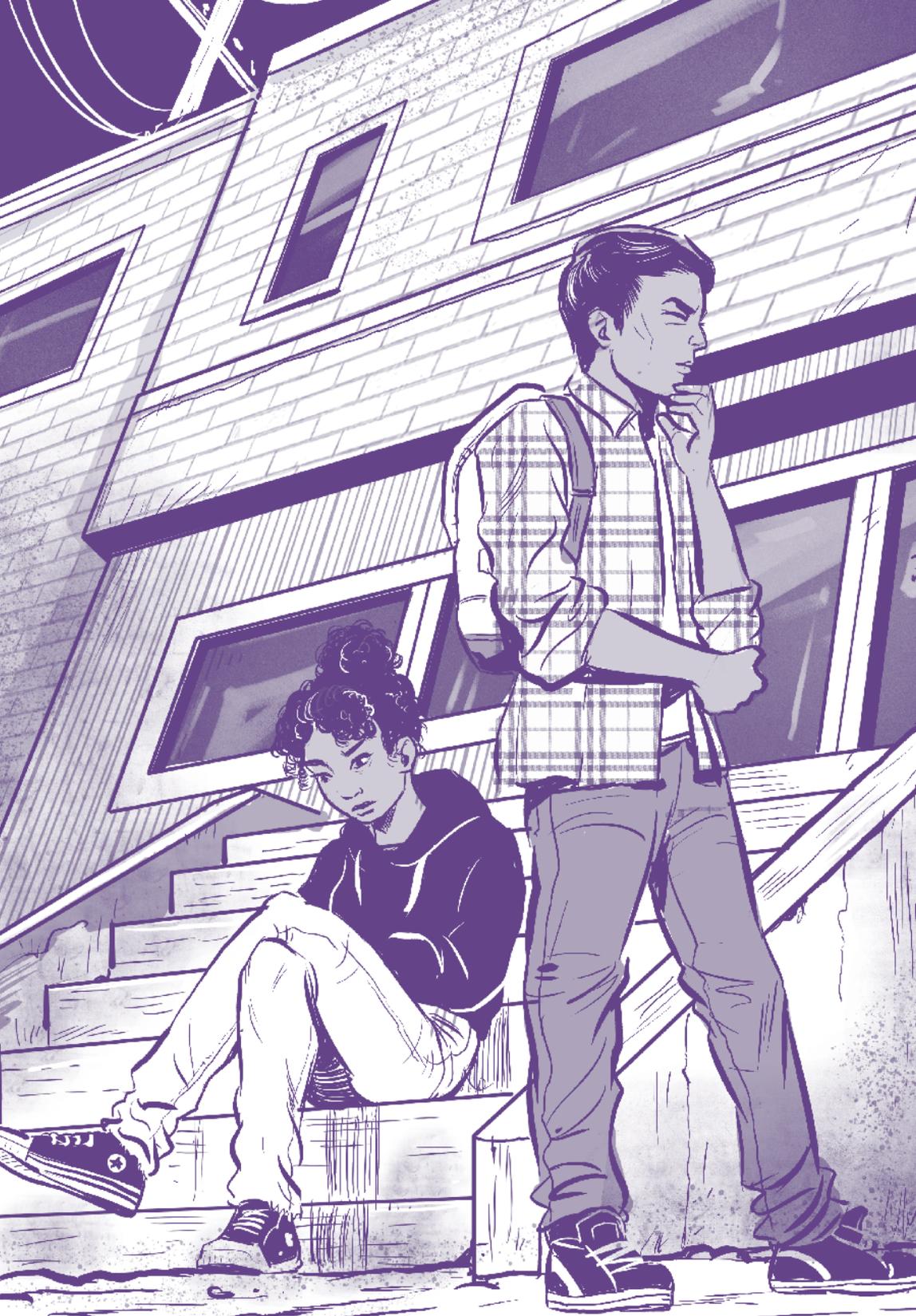
**To a benevolent universe** that somehow arranged all the coincidences required for me to be a writer at all and to have you reading this book. I’m blessed beyond my ability to understand, but I am eternally grateful.



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# INTRODUCTION

Do you ever feel worried or stressed out? If so, you're not alone. Everyone feels upset or overwhelmed at times.

Facing one tough challenge at a time might be okay, but that's not how life usually works. Instead, one thing piles on top of another. In a single week you might have to finish a big project, take a few tests, perform in the school play, put in hours at your job, and do a bunch of other things. At the same time, you might also be dealing with situations that come up at home, troubles you have with friends, or any number of dramas that can come about from online social interactions.

Stress is the feeling you have when facing many challenges at the same time. Imagine every worry, tough homework assignment, health concern, relationship problem, awful online comment about you, and disagreement is a separate rubber band around your head. That would be very uncomfortable, right? But it can get worse. As more stressors show up, more rubber bands get layered on until your head is completely covered. The pressure you feel on the inside of that ball of rubber bands is stress.

Knowing where to start fixing things can be difficult because stress comes from all the pressures in your life. It's normal to feel anxious and uncomfortable every day when you're feeling stressed—like something is wrong—even though you can't say exactly what it is.

## STRESS OVERLOAD

Dealing with a lot of stress can make people feel cornered—like there's nowhere safe to turn. Making good decisions under this kind of pressure can be difficult. Instead of calmly coming up with solutions to a problem, feelings of tension or anger can get in the way and cause people to do things that make a situation worse.

## Fighting Invisible Tigers

When you're stressed out, it can feel like you're in a thick jungle with lots of dangerous tigers—ferocious, hungry, but invisible tigers. You can't see them, but you can sense them quietly stalking you.

### Imagine . . .

You're alone in a steamy jungle. You've been hacking through it for days while huge mosquitoes chomp at your flesh. Weird noises and strange smells fill the air. Every now and then you hear a deep, menacing growl . . . and you worry what's going to happen next.



Now imagine living with this fear every day—always watchful, always on edge and ready to react in an instant. That’s how a person who doesn’t know how to handle stress can feel. Being on guard every minute takes an enormous amount of energy—whether it’s watching for real tigers or invisible ones in the form of tests, homework, bullying, friendship fallouts, or other stressors. Constant worrying about what might happen next is exhausting and can push you to your physical and emotional limits.

#### **STRESS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS**

High levels of stress over long periods of time can have severe effects. You might begin to feel aches and pains and get sick more often. Your performance at school and in other activities may suffer. Your relationships can fall apart. Stress can also affect your moods, you might start to feel angry, sad, lonely, or depressed.

The bad news is you can’t keep stressors out of your life completely—situations will come up that cause you to feel uncomfortable, frustrated, or overwhelmed. The good news is you can learn more about stress and positive ways to deal with the challenges and hard times. You can learn how to fight the invisible tigers when they do show up.

## **How Can This Book Help?**

The goal is to help you stay healthy, meet challenges, feel great about yourself, and make the most of your life. *Fighting Invisible Tigers* offers ideas you can use to really understand stress and handle it in positive ways:

“**Stress 101: The Lowdown on Invisible Tigers**” has information on stress and its physical and emotional effects. You’ll read about some of the unhealthy ways people deal with feeling overwhelmed and learn the important difference between short-term coping techniques and real stress management.

In “**11 Tiger-Taming Techniques**” you’ll learn about important skills you can use to manage stress—helpful strategies you can start using right now to relieve some of the pressure you feel and

to prepare for future challenges. The “Manage Digital Tigers” section offers strategies for managing stressors in the digital world—problems that can come from spending lots of time online.

And finally, “**First Aid for Tiger Bites**” has helpful suggestions for when you feel like you’ve hit your limit. If you’re feeling upset or overwhelmed right now, you can check out this section (page 127).

Reading this book will not make you an expert tiger tamer overnight, but practicing the many stress management skills it describes can help you make your invisible tigers seem smaller and much less ferocious. I sincerely hope that with the skills to manage some of the stress in your life, your heart, mind, and spirit will be more open to the opportunities and joys waiting for you.

Good luck and my very best wishes go with you on your adventure.

**Earl Hipp**

P.S. I like hearing from my readers. If you’re willing to share, I’d enjoy hearing about how you’re doing and what you’re learning. I may even be able to help others by sharing your thoughts in my books and presentations. Feel free to send your comments or questions to me in care of:

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## STRESS 101

# THE LOWDOWN ON INVISIBLE TIGERS



Stress may seem like a modern phenomenon, but actually it's been around for millions of years. Even in the times of cave-dwelling humans, people struggled with problems that made life complicated, difficult, and frightening—fires that wouldn't start, bad weather, spoiled meat, damp caves, unruly neighbors, grumpy family, and the challenges of simply surviving. But the most serious stressors for cave dwellers were the wild animals that saw them as, well, lunch.

## The Fight, Flight, or Freeze Response

On a nice day in the jungle, for example, a huge hungry saber-tooth tiger could suddenly leap at the cave dwellers.

### THE POWER OF FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE

The fight, flight, or freeze response is so sensitive that simply thinking about hungry tigers or any other frightening things can get your body fired up and ready to instantly react.

Because most tigers are in no mood for conversation, these early humans learned to react instantly to either attack the cat or run for safety. This required a finely tuned nervous system that could mobilize the body into what we now call the fight, flight, or freeze response. Over millions of

years, the people with the best fight, flight, or freeze skills lived on to tell stories around the fire, and the others . . . let's just say they didn't make it home for dinner.

While most of us will never have to face real tigers, the world we live in can feel every bit as threatening as the one that cave dwellers experienced. Think about it for a moment: There are a lot of situations that can make us feel upset or seriously threatened.

The environment is being destroyed—will we even have a place to live in 50 years?

Since we moved to this town, I haven't been able to make friends.

I lost my phone—it had all my contacts in it.

My life is drama central. Justine hates me and Maria says I stepped in on her crush.

Someone was stabbed in my neighborhood and I'm afraid to walk alone.

I'm overweight and everybody in my class ignores me.

There's a guy at school who thinks I'm his personal punching bag.

When I see Sam using and selling, I get scared he'll go to jail like his brother.

I have no idea what I'm going to do with my life when I finish school.

I have a huge test next week that makes up half my biology grade.

My parents had a major fight—Mom moved out.

I get sad when I see starving people on TV.

Some challenges definitely are more difficult to deal with than others. But the problem is, whenever you're up against something, anything that makes you feel worried or threatened—even if you're just thinking about it—your body still responds as if it's meeting a hungry tiger. At the first hint of trouble, the alarm goes off, and instantly your body gets ready to fight, run away, or lock up in paralysis.

During times of high stress, the fight, flight, or freeze response causes many physical changes in your body—all at the same time—and if you don't understand what's happening, it might feel like you're having a serious medical problem.

## Effects of Fight, Flight, or Freeze

Here are some of the ways your body might react to a major stress event in your life:

**Your heart pounds.** The body needs all the oxygen-rich blood it can get, and it needs it in a hurry, so your heart pumps harder and faster. Your breathing also speeds up to make more oxygen available.

**Your hands and feet become cold.** Small capillaries in the hands and feet constrict to force blood toward the brain to keep you alert and also into the large muscles used for running and fighting.

**There is a rush of warmth to your face.** The carotid arteries in the neck open up to allow more blood to the brain, sometimes causing the cheeks and ears to turn pink. You might get a pressure headache, or your face will feel hot.

**Your mouth gets dry and your stomach feels upset.** During fight, flight, or freeze, the digestion process shuts down, so blood is available for the body's largest running and fighting muscles. You may feel tingly or have "butterflies" in your stomach.

**You feel restless.** Glands and organs produce chemicals—including adrenaline—that help you become more aware, focused, and prepared to move fast. You'll feel restless, be impatient, and might find your feet tapping away.

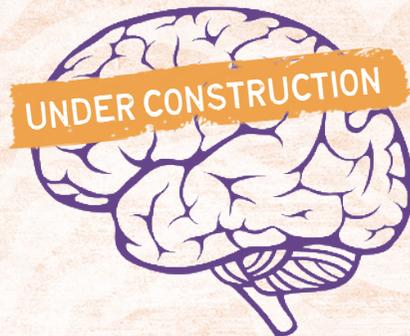
**Your hands sweat.** Anticipating the extra heat that running and fighting generate, the body turns on its climate-control system and produces moisture on the surface of the skin. Evaporation of this moisture creates a cooling effect.

**You go blank.** When escape by flight (getting away from the problem) or fighting to survive aren't possible, you may become immobilized—physically, mentally, or even emotionally. This reaction is called disassociation and it can happen to anyone. When we can't deal with the challenge we're facing, our brains “shut down” and disconnect from the situation. It's like we're playing dead and hoping the danger will just pass.

It's important to remember that all of these reactions are normal responses for *anyone* encountering a big tiger, a major stress event, or more stressors than they're able to handle. No one is immune to these physical and emotional reactions when they are facing something they perceive as a serious danger.

## STRESS AFFECTS YOUR MIND

Stress not only causes changes to your body, but it can also cause your brain to short-circuit. When you feel totally stressed, the decision-making part of your brain can go offline as stress chemicals flood your system. So, what does this mean? When you're stressed, you are a lot more likely to feel confused, make bad decisions, do things in a panic, or freeze up with inaction. These are all reactions that can make a situation worse. Teens are especially affected by this process because their brains are developing very quickly and changing during adolescence.



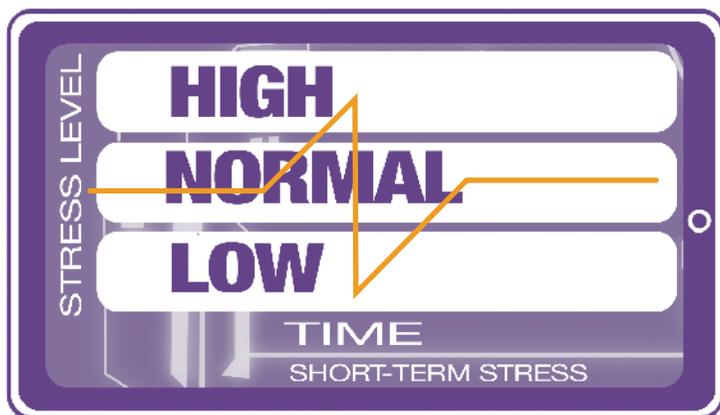
## STRESS AFFECTS YOUR EMOTIONS

When your body is flooded with stress chemicals causing all kinds of bodily sensations and your brain is going a hundred miles an hour trying to figure out what to do next, your emotions can light up and add to your anxiousness. If you're operating at your limits, feelings of fear, hopelessness, sadness, restlessness, confusion, or a sense of being lost can be common.



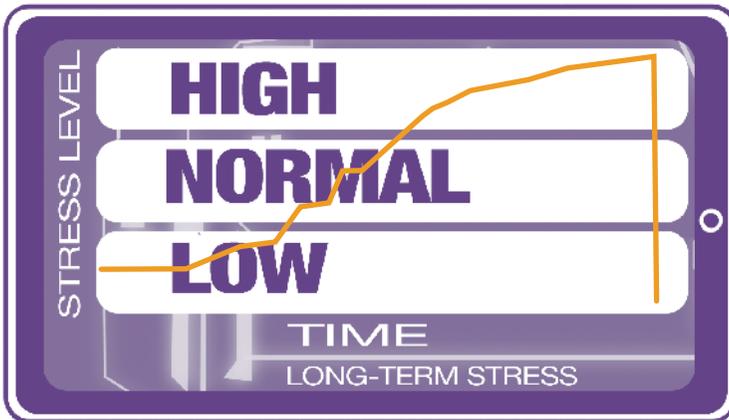
### Short- and Long-Term Stress

The fight, flight, or freeze response can take a lot out of you because fighting tigers—real or imaginary—is a whole body-mind-emotion experience. Fortunately, most periods of intense stress don't usually last very long. After the immediate danger of a stressful event passes, the body gradually calms down and enters a period of rest and recuperation before returning to a normal state. This is called short-term stress.



Short-term stress usually passes pretty quickly and without a lasting impact. But what happens if you have a lot of things causing stress in your everyday life? What if your life is full of invisible tigers—large and small—that don't ever seem to go away?

When you're experiencing lots of stressors over long periods of time, your body doesn't have time to calm down, rest, and recuperate after every stressful thing that happens. This is called long-term stress. Because you want to keep going, it's easy to adapt to higher and higher stress levels without realizing it. You might think you are doing okay, but you're actually living with an unhealthy amount of stress. This is why long-term stress can be so harmful—people don't realize the toll it's taking physically, mentally, and emotionally. Then, one day, they suddenly reach their limit and something lets go.



Seriously stressed people are usually trying to stay on top of things—even when they feel stalked by invisible tigers. But at some point, constant high levels of stress will become overwhelming. You will be trying harder and harder to keep up with all the challenges you're facing while—without realizing it—you're gradually losing physical energy, the ability to think clearly, and your performance edge. It's like chopping wood with an ax and never taking time to sharpen the blade or

#### STRESS AND PIMPLES

While many effects of stress are quite serious, others can simply be annoying. For example, some researchers believe there is a link between stress and pimples. In the largest-ever study on acne and stress, teens with high-stress lives were 23 percent more likely to have their acne get worse. Apparently, when you're stressed, your skin knows it, and may react with angry eruptions.

trying to stream a video using an internet connection that is getting slower and slower. Eventually, things that were easy become more difficult.

## GET HELP!

If you feel like you're reaching your limit, it's important to talk with someone you trust—like a parent, teacher, or friend—right away. The person you share with might have solutions to challenges you haven't thought of. See "First Aid for Tiger Bites" (pages 127–130) for more ideas about what to do when you're feeling overwhelmed.

## Coping Strategies

Life is full of situations to deal with—responsibilities at home, schoolwork, figuring out where you fit in, friendships. And then there are the unexpected stressors that can happen at any time. So how do you cope? What is "coping" anyway?

Think of coping as the short-term approach to dealing with the feeling of being stressed. Coping behaviors don't fix the problems that cause stress, but they can give you temporary relief from anxious feelings. There's nothing wrong with most coping activities—things like watching TV or napping—as long as they aren't harmful and don't go on forever.

What are some of these short-term actions people use to cope with feelings of stress? There are three basic categories: Distraction, Avoidance, and Escape.

### 1. Distraction—Or, I'll deal with it later.

"When I need a breather, I go for a bike ride."

—Sarah, 12

"At the end of a long day, I like to go online to see what people are up to. It helps me decompress from all the stuff that's happened to me."—Mario, 14

Distractions are the most common coping activities. They're usually pretty harmless and include things like hanging out online, reading, eating, or playing video games—pretty much any activity that allows you some time away from stressors. Distractions can be good for short-term relaxation and can even be productive. For example, taking a short break for a snack while studying is a way to briefly get away and come back with clearer focus. But taking too many breaks—such as to text your friends or chat online—won't get your work done and can increase the stress you feel.

Distractions help you avoid feeling stressed for a little while, but the more you use them to procrastinate, the more the stress you're avoiding creeps to the surface. That's often when people move on to the next level of coping.

## 2. Avoidance—Or, I might deal with it . . . sometime.

"My friends and I are pretty intense basketball players. We could play hoops all night."—Kwame, 13

"I admit it—when I don't want to do something, I go online. It's weird because I seem to get lost in time. Sometimes I look at the clock and it's hours later."  
—Brie, 14

Think of avoidance as distractions carried to the extreme—like when watching a little TV becomes watching every night for hours and hours. It's when a simple activity starts to take up more and more of your time and energy and causes you to put off dealing with things you're worried about or don't want to do. Unfortunately, this can lead to a *vicious circle* of behavior. That's when distractions pretty much take over your life. For example, hanging out with friends is great and can be an effective way to de-stress. But spending all your time with friends—day and night, in person or online—to distract yourself from difficulties at home or school can become a stress-generating and self-destructive pattern of avoidance.

**Overachievement.** Some serious avoidance activities can appear to be positive. For example, people who are bothered by some deep problem may get super-involved in activities and over-achieve to try to overcome negative feelings they have. They may excel in the classroom, be star athletes, and stay active in many school clubs. People who do this may seem to be totally together, but all of their activity is just a way to avoid dealing with the main problem.

**People who overachieve often don't have the time, energy, or awareness to address the root feelings of stress.** This can quickly become a vicious circle—the more time spent staying busy, the worse a person might feel. The worse they feel, the more active they become. Around and around it goes in a spiral, down into a deeper and deeper hole of exhaustion and isolation. Vicious circles can close in from all sides, growing tighter and tighter. Because the people affected are so concentrated on trying to keep it all together, they may not notice things steadily getting worse.

**Procrastination.** Pretty much everyone puts off boring or hard tasks from time to time. Some of the smartest, most motivated, and successful people are known (or secret) procrastinators. When you occasionally put off things, you can pretty much survive—even if it means a late night of studying at some point. But continuously using procrastination as an avoidance strategy can invite a vicious circle—one where mountains of things pile up for you to do, and you develop more drastic ways to avoid facing it all. Before long, you might have a stress-filled mess of missed deadlines, poor excuses, and confused priorities.

**Procrastination is most dangerous when it becomes a way of avoiding the hardest parts of life—like tough problems at home, breakdowns in your relationships, or difficulties at school.** When you put off dealing with hard problems or emotions, you can find yourself living with high levels of anxiety or confusion. You might end up feeling panicked or isolated until something inside you breaks. It's like slowly shaking a can of soda. Things look the same from the outside, but when you pop the tab—POW—you have one big, nasty mess on your hands.

**Illness.** Another avoidance strategy is using sickness to avoid the hard parts of life. Many students learn as little kids that illness is an acceptable reason to miss school—wasn't it nice to sleep in and chill out in front of the TV because you were "sick"? While it's tempting to take advantage of this strategy today, it's a risky play to use illness to avoid difficult situations.

For example, one of the main reasons students avoid school is out of fear—fear that they will be hurt, teased, or harassed by others. Bullying is a serious problem in many schools, but it is not an excuse to drop out. It can be hard to speak up about the person sending nasty texts about you or the kid who shoves your head into lockers, even if that's the best approach. What is the alternative? To avoid dealing with it by faking aches and pains to stay home? Each time you skip you fall further behind in your classes. Meanwhile, the main source of your stress—the situation at school—goes unresolved and adds to the tension you feel.

#### STRESS AND SICKNESS

Faking illness can turn into a vicious circle of real, stress-driven health problems. Headaches, digestive problems, allergies, muscle pain, high blood pressure, eating disorders, chronic fatigue, and depression are only some of the many serious stress-related conditions.

