

HELPING BOYS TO MANAGE Stress



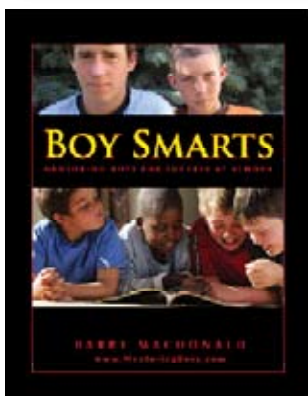
Did your son saunter through a lazy and adventurous Huck-Finn kind of summer? Did he ramble through July and August, playing street hockey and baseball, picking berries, swimming and skipping stones in a river? Was there lots of carefree laughter and good-natured banter when he was around?

If you can mostly answer yes to these questions, count yourself fortunate.

During the past summer parents seeking my professional input described different versions of summer for their boys. They talked about conflict with their stressed and frazzled boys who seemed so angry and reactive. The details of each story are different, but the common element is that boys appear on edge, worn down, uncommunicative. These parents long to understand the troubles of their sons, and to uncover optimistic pathways. They want to mentor their sons to manage stress better.

Of course, the parents who come see me may not be representative, but less anecdotal evidence also indicates that boys are having a hard time in school, in our homes, and in our culture.

Almost a year ago the *Globe and Mail*, in a six-part series, focussed on the plight of "failing boys," reporting "that boys, as a



a group, rank behind girls by nearly every measure of scholastic achievement. They earn lower grades overall in elementary school and high school. They trail in reading and writing, and 30 per cent of them land in the bottom quarter of standardized tests, compared with 19 per cent of girls. Boys are also more likely to be picked out for behavioural problems, more likely to repeat a grade and to drop out of school altogether.”

We cannot dismiss these kinds of findings by taking refuge in the cliché that *boys will be boys*. These kinds of statistics invite us to ask deeper questions: Which boys are struggling? What drives their struggle? Are there specific interventions that might help individual boys?

Countless emails I have received show that parents don't want to be pacified by easy answers: not single-gender learning, or increased use of technology. The success of any innovation will still depend on the attitudes teachers hold toward boys with diverse needs. For example, one parent described her disappointment with her son's previous teacher who insisted that her son sit while working at a computer, despite his need to stand.

How can we help boys manage frustrations and stress?

Toward the middle of the summer I met with a single mother and her adolescent son to discuss how the two of them might overcome the discouragement of the boy's recent school failures and the resulting stress in their two-person home. This mother wanted to talk with her son, to empathize with his stress, and to problem-solve. He isolated himself, didn't want to talk, but agreed to seek help from a *coach*.

After three energetic sessions we devised a list of 12 practical stress-busting strategies. Agreeing that our list of ideas could help others, they gave me permission to share them with you this month. I hope that they might serve as talking points for you and your son to discuss ways to manage stress.



I suggest that you read or paraphrase the following description of stress to your son first and discuss the 12 suggestions that follow.

Stress Can Help us Perform Better

Basically, stress is our body's way of responding to the demands of physical and mental challenges or perceived dangers. For thousands of years the fight-or-flight biochemical response that stress produces, with its speeded up heart rate, and increased flow of hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, has given people bursts of energy and high-intensity focus so that they can better respond to pressures and challenges in their environment. During high-intensity stress our concentration becomes more focussed, our reaction time quickens, and we become stronger. Some stress is good for us, speeding up our reaction time in emergencies, or helping us perform better when we take that penalty shot.

The problem comes when the stress response has no chance to re-set itself, when the nervous system keeps on high alert for a long period of time. The pressures of school—teachers, homework, exams, social groupings—as well as pressures from home, family, and society can create chronic long-term stress that wears people out.

When there are periods of calm and few problems, heightened stress reaction is helpful. However, chronic stress can disturb our sleep, thoughts, and body rhythms.

It can make us anxious and cranky so that we behave in ways that bring us more stress. We may overreact to little things—such as someone’s request to stop playing video games, to clean our room, or do our homework. We may find it impossible to concentrate or make decisions. We may try to make the stress go away by smoking weed, drinking too much alcohol, or indulging in other forms of personal recklessness. We can gain weight. We can lose weight. We can develop headaches, digestive problems, vague aches and pains. Excessive stress pushes people around in different ways.

The effects of ongoing, relentless stress are similar to the effects of being over-caffeinated. A jolt of super-high energy helps you focus for an intense short period, but since these high energy levels can’t be sustained indefinitely, you crash. Chronic stress leads to exhaustion, emotional instability, and often a complete inability to cope. Stress can contribute to anxiety, depression, and mood disorders. It can even trigger panic attacks.

Studies also show that males and females tend to cope with stress differently. Women are more likely to talk about their problems with others while men tend to seek the company of others but avoid talk about their troubles.

Both approaches can work, but the male reluctance to express feelings can lead to increased negative effects of stress, including a sense of isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse. Men are four times more likely than women to commit suicide, and men are more likely than women to abuse drugs and alcohol and commit violent acts.

Since stress is a necessary part of life, the key is to learn to manage it.

Below are a dozen tips a teenage boy, his mother and I came up with.

STRESS-BUSTING STRATEGIES

1. Hydrate!

Dehydration can lead to fatigue, dizziness, poor concentration and reduced cognitive abilities. Even mild levels of dehydration can impact school performance. Keep a water bottle at your desk to sip throughout the day and drink four glasses during the school day and eight glasses in total for the day. Avoid caffeine and other ‘power’ drinks. Studies show that 75 percent of teens consume caffeine daily through coffee, tea, and soft drinks, increasing dehydration and even sleeping problems. Caffeine is a stimulant and can make you feel good briefly, but it will fray your nerves in the long term.

2. Eat healthy nutritious food.

Eat home-cooked food whenever possible. Fast food saps energy. While chips, muffins, cookies and other carbohydrate snacks are common for school eating, include fruit, vegetables, and healthy protein snacks, such as raw almonds. Note that tyrosine, an amino acid found in raw almonds, avocado, and bananas, is used to make dopamine, and is associated with enthusiasm. Also, the crunchiness of nuts, celery, carrots, and rice cakes actually have some stress-reducing benefits.

3. Sleep well.

A lack of sleep will not only make you cranky and impair your ability to learn and socialize—it will also weaken your immune system, making infection and illness more likely. Establish a routine time for going to bed and getting up. Avoid electronic screens at least an hour before bedtime. Don’t store your cellphone under your pillow to respond to every text message buzz or you’ll never get any quality sleep. Some people argue that the radiation from the phone may even cause abnormalities to your brain over time. Why not sleep with your phone turned off and stored in another room?



4. Be active.

Inactivity reduces oxygen to the brain, causing dendrites and axons—parts of the nerve cells involved in sending electrical impulses—to degrade. Regular activity and exercise will loosen muscles, reduce tension, and give the mind a chance to clear. Activity boosts levels of serotonin and feel-good endorphins. Movement of any kind—even chewing gum—improves thinking and the processing of emotions by increasing the bi-lateral stimulation between the brain's hemispheres. The few minutes you spend away from your studies—or the screen—will help you be more alert and focused later.

5. Pay attention to nagging unfinished tasks.

Overtime, nagging unfinished tasks (also called NUT's) hang over your head and can wear you down. Pay attention to whatever you have been putting off and make some time to get started, and get it done. Once you start eliminating your NUTs, you'll feel much better.

6. Map your day & take charge of your life.

Use your school planner to organize your life and to make lists—they do work! Though you don't have to stick to an exact schedule, organizing and prioritizing your tasks, rather than leaving your day to chance, will help relieve stress.

7. Practice positive self-talk.

Focus on what you do well and seek to be optimistic about your ability to cope with stress. Say: *“Even though this project/task/job is difficult/hard, I know that I will figure it out.”* In a new book entitled *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting it Right When You Have To*, Dr. Sian Beilock discusses the ways that while many people choke on their performance when the stakes are high, seeing the performance as a challenge rather than a threat will make a positive outcome more likely. Before your next exam, public speaking challenge, or difficult encounter, think about past successes, and interpret any sweaty palms or speeded up heart rate as a sign that you are ready for a challenge.

8. Manage anger and frustrations.

As muscles tense, hearts pound, and stomachs ache anger elicits a very physical response. Often *letting it rip* only escalates feelings of aggression, making it worse for you and those around you. The Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh warns against “rehearsing anger” by venting it without restraint. Recognize these physical reactions as warning signs and use them to trigger a healthy escape plan to shift and release emotions as they move from upsetting emotions to calmer and more in-control emotions. Deep breathing is an ancient way to calm the mind and the body. Breathe in through your nose to the count of 5 and exhale slowly through your mouth to the count of 10. While the counting length will vary with lung capacity know that long and slow exhalations release stress from the body and calm the mind. When you feel angry and frustrated, you could also do something that distracts you from those aggressive feelings. Make time to unwind and chill. Involve yourself in enjoyable activities, such as playing a few licks on your guitar, listening to music, sketching, shooting some hoops, fixing your bike, reading about something that brings your pleasure, or anything you love to do.

9. Hang out with positive people who make you feel good.

Being around negative people who have pessimistic attitudes can stress you out. One of the most vital ways you can reduce the negative effects of stress is to laugh and have fun with friends and family members. Having fun decreases stress hormones, lowers blood pressure and will help you to lighten up.

10. Unplug.

When you consider that the amount of digital information is roughly doubling every year it is easy to become overloaded, racing to keep pace with bombarding new digital media. We want to keep up. We fear missing out. But what good is a head full of ideas if you are stressed-out, feeling empty, or lack peace of mind? As you practice unplugging from your phone, the internet, or a video game notice how soothing it can be to sit-like-a-lump-on-a-log, space out, day-dream, loaf, or simply hang out in a hammock rocking idly with the help of a big toe. Become aware of how your thoughts flow more easily, even abundantly, and how you are effortlessly able to percolate ideas and harvest your imagination.

11. Pitch in.

Contributing to help others can be one of life's greatest stress-busters. In fact, research shows that those who contribute to the well-being of others often enjoy higher levels of mental health. Knowing that you are part of a story that is much bigger than just yourself can help you to think beyond your own challenges. When we temporarily hit the pause button on our own stress and redirect our attention to helping others we can boost our mood and gain a fresh outlook. Imagine waking up every morning knowing that your daily actions count and make a difference to those around you. So pitch in and help to make your home, school, neighbourhood, and even the world a better place.



12. Take action before stress explodes.

Too much stress? Find someone to talk with so you can get some feedback. Although some guys foolishly think that it is a sign of manliness to do everything on their own and not ask for help, know that seeking feedback from trusted others is a smart way to reduce stress. If you feel nervous about opening up too much to a friend, a family member, or a trusted adult, talk with a counsellor or a life coach. Trained professionals will keep your conversation private—count on it. Talking in the company of a wise and empathic person can be a great way of lightening your load for a while, and getting a new perspective.

Overcoming Our Own Limiting Systemic Stress Responses

Many parents, teachers, and cultural leaders are worried—even stressed—when we see that our boys are not thriving.

It is my hope that we will be stressed just enough to embrace a challenge, not slink away from a perceived threat.

We can start by simply taking time to listen to what boys say, verbally and non-verbally, about their struggles. How can we meet them where they are? How might we even question whether *the rules* in our homes and schools are working the way they should be?

Many thoughtful parents and teachers caution against framing boys' increasing problems as school problems alone.

My intent in the monthly *Boy Smarts* newsletter is to explore approaches that school staff, parents, grandparents, teachers, and other mentors can draw upon to support and encourage boys, while also respecting the needs of girls.

And in these challenging times, all of us need healthy ways of managing the stressors that any new school year brings. • • •

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Breaking News...

New evidence from the *University of British Columbia* published in *Child Development* this week has found a strong relationship between our own stress and the stress our children experience in life, even one that alters their genes! My intent in bringing this breaking news to your attention is not to burden but to encourage you to seek ways to improve how you manage stress, especially the pressures associated with parenting and teaching boys.

I invite you to join me at an upcoming *Boy Smarts Action Talk* parenting workshop or a *Literacy & Boys – Strategies for Success* teacher workshop to reduce your anxieties and to strengthen your skills. If your schedule prohibits attendance pick up a copy of *Boy Smarts* or my new book, *Boys on Target – Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*, where you will discover dozens of practical suggestions that will bring you and your boys relief.

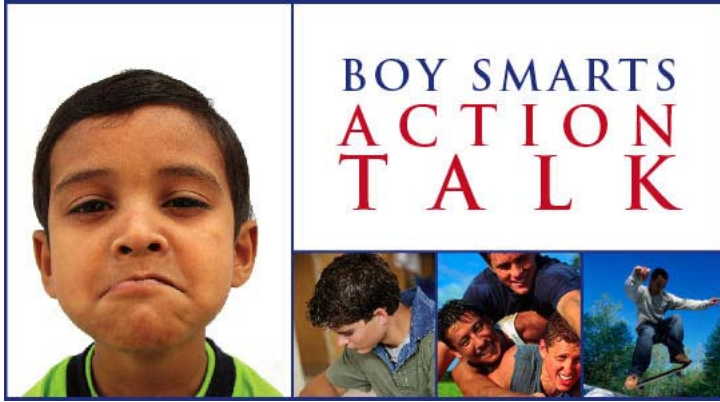
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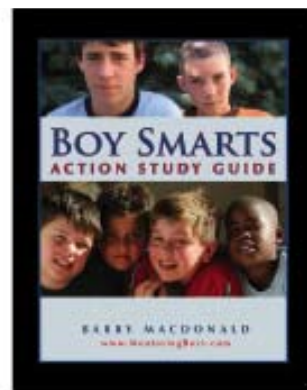
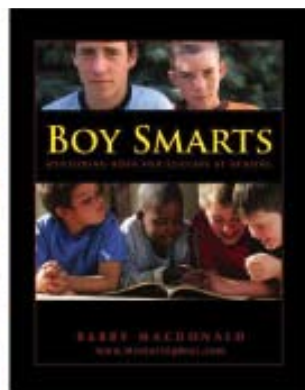
Saskatoon, Sept 17 - 30% open
Calgary, Oct 1 - 40% open
Surrey, Oct 8 - 40% open
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Montreal, Nov 19 - NEW!
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Literacy & Boys - Strategies for Success

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