Stress and Drug Abuse

The Brain Connection

Myth vs. Reality

Myth 1: Drug abuse is harmful, but it does relieve stress.

Reality: Some drugs of abuse affect the brain in the same way stress does. Long-term abuse of drugs makes users more sensitive to everyday stressors than non-users.

Myth 2: All stress is bad for you.

Reality: Stress can help you deal with tough situations. It can also be associated with positive changes, such as a new job. However, long-term stress can lead to physical and emotional health problems.

Myth 3: Everyone deals with stress in the same way.

Reality: People deal with stress in different ways. How you deal with stress determines how it affects your body.

Managing Stress

Anyone can learn to manage stress, but it does take practice. Here are some practical tips:

• Take care of yourself. Healthy foods, exercise, and enough sleep really do make you feel better and better able to cope!

• Focus. To keep from feeling overwhelmed, concentrate on challenges one at a time.

• Keep calm. Step away from an argument or confrontation by taking a deep breath. Go for a walk or do some other physical activity.

• Move on. If you don’t achieve something you were trying for, practice and prepare for the next time. Or check out some other activity.

• Talk about it. Talking to an understanding listener who remains calm can be very helpful.

LATEST RESEARCH

NIDA researchers have found the following connections between stress and drug abuse:

• Stress can cause changes in the brain like those caused by addictive drugs. This suggests that some people who experience stress may be more vulnerable to drug addiction or drug relapse.

• Those who become addicted to drugs may already be hypersensitive to stress.

• Long-term potentiation (LTP) is a key brain mechanism involved in memory and learning. Researchers have shown that LTP is involved in how both drug exposure and stress affect the brain.

• Stress can put people at risk for substance abuse.

Stressing Out?

Read what some teens have said causes them stress:

Being Successful:
“Between my job, homework, responsibilities at home, and studying for my SATs, it’s easy to feel stressed out and overwhelmed.”
—Female, Los Angeles

Being “Perfect”:
“Having struggled with eating disorders for many years, I finally realize that I make comparisons to stress in my life. It’s easy to feel stressed out and overwhelmed.”
—Female, Chicago

Physical Appearance: “Television and movies influence the physical appearance and style of most teens ... the most important influence comes from the opposite sex.”
—Male, Los Angeles

“Healthy foods, exercise, and enough sleep really do make you feel better and better able to cope!”

Nora D. Volkow, M.D., Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

“Stress can put people at risk for substance abuse.”

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