

# Unit 8. Nicotine and your mental health



## Nicotine, stress and anxiety

One of the most common reason youth report vaping or smoking is to relieve stress. Using nicotine to cope is NOT effective and in fact it can do more harm than good to your mental health (not to mention all the ways it can harm your physical health).

### What is stress?

Stress is the uncomfortable feeling you get when you're worried, scared, angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed. Everyone experiences stress, and some stress is okay. It can give you the motivation to get things done. For example, feeling stressed about an upcoming test can motivate you to study. But too much stress can affect your emotional and physical health.

If you have too much stress, you can experience:

Tense muscles	Headaches	Sweaty palms
Grinding teeth	Racing heart	Trouble sleeping
Tight jaw	Low energy	Lack of motivation
Nausea, diarrhea	Difficulty concentrating	Feeling overwhelmed

## Causes of stress

Stress can be caused by many different things.

- listening to parents argue
- an upcoming test or exam
- your parents' expectations
- applying to jobs or university or college
- being pressured to do something you know is bad for you, like vaping
- an upcoming game or other sporting event
- not having money to do things or buy things you want
- dealing with interpersonal relationships
- wanting to fit in

## Anxiety

Anxiety can cause you to feel tense, irritable and much the same as you feel when you are stressed. The difference is that stress is often caused by something external, and when that trigger goes away, so does the stress. Anxiety is feeling worried, nervous, or panicky, often without an obvious cause. It's normal to experience anxiety from time to time, but it can be a problem if it's a frequent part your daily life and/or it affects your schoolwork, your relationships or your health.



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### How nicotine affects mental health

When youth who choose to vape are asked why, "To reduce stress" is one of the most common reasons. Recent studies have actually found a link between vaping and worsening mental health issues.

Why do people think vaping or smoking relieves stress? Nicotine can provide an immediate sense of relaxation. This is because it causes the release of dopamine in your brain. Dopamine is a "feel good hormone", meaning that it causes you to feel pleasure. But once this feeling wears off in an hour or two, you're faced with a new stress: your body's desire for more nicotine.

Over time, it takes more and more nicotine to release the amount of dopamine you need to feel pleasure. Regular nicotine use can worsen anxiety and stress and leave you more susceptible to experiencing symptoms of depression. People who vape are more likely to be diagnosed with depression compared with people who have never vaped. Having symptoms of depression increases the likelihood of a teen vaping.

Quitting nicotine has been linked to improvements in mental health, including less anxiety and stress, reduced depression and better mood.

### Other ways to deal with stress and anxiety

Nobody can avoid all stress, but you can learn ways to deal with it. When you're stressed, it is normal to want to feel better. Anything that makes you feel better is called a coping strategy.

Negative strategies can be quick fixes, but they're harmful because they can be dangerous and make stress worse in the long run. Negative coping strategies include fighting, vaping, isolating yourself from family and friends. They are especially worrisome if they are a major way you deal with stress because you may turn to these behaviours more often during hard times. Think about some of the other ways people cope with stress that can really hurt them.

Using negative coping strategies is one of the ways substance use starts. If you are using negative coping strategies, ask yourself, "Why?". If it is to deal with problems, consider other ways of dealing with the same problems. There are many healthy ways of coping. Healthy coping strategies are safe and can help you feel better without causing disruptions in your life. See "10 tips for managing stress and anxiety".