



### 1-3 Info Sheet

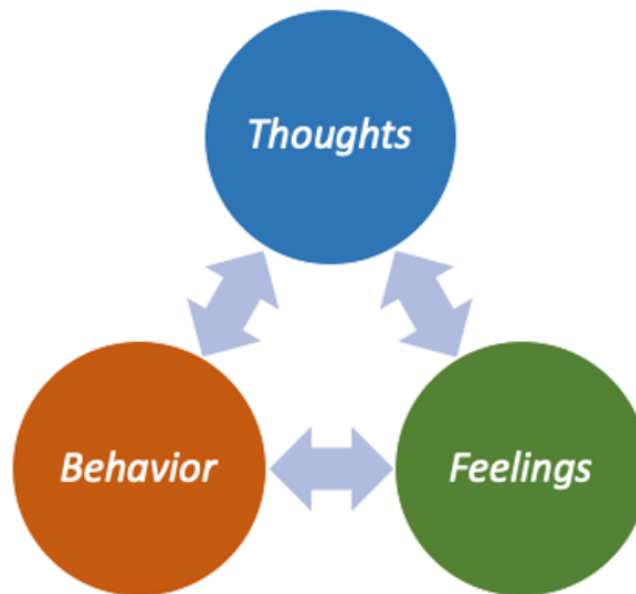
#### Understanding Stress: How Your Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors Affect Each Other

By Carrie Goldman

Everyone experiences stress at some point in their life. It is normal and unavoidable! Stress can come from many places. A math test, a fight with your friends, worrying about a family member -- these are all situations that create stress for you.

Stress comes out in many different ways. Sometimes it makes you feel sad; other times it makes you feel scared or angry. Some kids cope with stress more easily than others. Our goal is to help you learn to make the best possible decisions when you are stressed.

Your personal reaction to stress depends on three parts: your *feelings*, your *thoughts* and your *behaviors*. Let's look more closely at each and how they affect each other.



## Feelings

Your feelings include your emotions and physical sensations you experience. A physical sensation means something you can feel in your body, like a stomachache. There are hundreds of different emotions! When you are faced with stress, you are more likely to have uncomfortable feelings. These can be harder to manage than pleasant feelings.

**Scared** is when you have feelings of fear right in the moment that the scary thing is happening. You might feel scared when you are taking a test and you don't know the answers to the questions. You might feel scared when you are with a group of friends and they are doing something risky that you don't want to do.

**Anxious** is when you feel worried about an event that is in the future or that hasn't happened yet. You might feel anxious before going out to recess because you are worried about finding a friend who will play with you.

When you are scared or anxious you may also experience certain **uncomfortable physical sensations**. Your legs might feel weak. You may experience rapid heartbeat, a tight chest, dry mouth, stomach pain, or a choking sensation. It may be hard to swallow or catch a satisfying breath.

Experiencing strong, negative feelings or physical sensations, can drive you to act very quickly, before you've had time to think through your reactions. Your heart pounds as you approach the lunch table with the kids that you want to sit with, and before you know it, you've just kept walking right past the table. When you are safely past the table, your thoughts follow, and you criticize yourself for not being brave enough to ask to join them.

## Thoughts

When you experience stress, your brain often tells you automatic, scary thoughts that make you feel worse. These automatic thoughts happen instantly, often without you noticing them. Once you have learned to identify these thoughts, you can work to replace them with positive self-talk.

**Automatic thoughts** are usually negative messages that increase your feelings of anxiety or sadness. Some examples are "I'm going to fail this test" or "Nobody wants to play with me."

**Positive self-talk** is a mindful choice you make to fight back against the automatic thoughts. You might realize that the reason you are avoiding the playground at recess is because you are thinking a yucky thought like, "Nobody likes me."

Now, try to replace the yucky thought with positive self-talk such as "I talked with a nice kid earlier today and it went well. I will ask to join in their game at recess."

In this example, you use positive self-talk to change your thoughts *first*, which helps change your feelings (you feel calmer) and then you can change your behavior (you go find other kids to play with at recess instead of avoiding everyone).

## **Behaviors**

As we've seen, our behaviors are influenced by our feelings and our thoughts. You might be feeling pressure to join friends that are doing something you know is wrong. There are many different behaviors you can choose in response. Joining in the group and hoping you don't get caught is a behavior. Avoiding the situation is also a behavior.

**Unhealthy coping behaviors** occur when you use unhealthy strategies to help you endure the stressful situation. For example, you might choose to tease someone else along with friends in order to feel like you fit in with the group. You might choose to stay at home alone *all the time* instead of dealing with the anxiety of the playground.

**Healthy coping behaviors** occur when you choose to replace the unhealthy actions with healthy ones. For example, you might reach out to a friend that's an ally and make plans to go together to the playground. You might decide to do eat a healthy snack instead of junk food before doing homework.

Throughout your life, you will have stress. Learning to use positive self-talk and choosing to do healthy coping behaviors will help you now, when you are a teenager, and when you are an adult!