On Your Mind

By

Dr. Jon Robinson

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Everybody talks about stress these days, but what is that? Physically? Emotionally? My 10 year old son picks at his fingernails and absent-mindedly rocks gently back and forth when he’s concentrating. Is that stress? I’m so confused.

Signed,

Concerned Parent

Dear Concerned,

 Wow! Have you opened a can of worms! Stress is a psych-social-emotional-physical phenomenon (say *that* five times real fast), and it’s everywhere. In fact, there is eustress, the good kind, as well as distress, the bad kind.

 Your son’s behavior may signal stress. First, simply call attention to it. “Son, you’re rocking back and forth again. Everything okay?” It may just be an unconscious gesture. Other, more serious signs of stress include disruption in sleep patterns, loss of appetite, or over-eating, change of behavioral type (such as a quiet child becomes more vocal, a vocal child becomes more quiet). Physically, skin problems, other than developmentally generated acne, headaches, and gastrointestinal issues all are frequently associated with stress.

 Now, getting less press because it is not problematic, there is eustress. That’s the good stuff. For example, gravity is eustress. It just keeps us from floating into space. Anticipation of Christmas or birthdays, assuming there are good memories of these events, would also be examples of eustress.

 Oftentimes, with our help, kids can turn historically distressful situations into eustressful. If your son plays little league baseball and has been in a slump at the plate, you might offer more batting practice and coaching to help him raise his confidence. Next time he comes to bat, with more confidence, he will look forward to it and anticipate a base hit. The same experience, batting, can be either distressful or eustressful, depending on your son’s mindset.

 So, use active listening when your son seems stressed. This will help him sort out his feelings and guide you in how to help him. Stress in and of itself is not bad. Focus on helping your son deal with it and turn it into a teachable moment.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My children get physical wellness checks every year. Occasionally, these checks have caught something that could have become a terrible illness, had we not caught it before getting out of hand. Is it also a good idea to get mental wellness checks?

Signed,

Just Wondering

Dear Ms. Wondering,

 What a great idea!! You are really ahead of your time. You know, unfortunately, there is still some stigma to mental illness, so people tend to ignore symptoms until they are really pronounced. And, while current insurance laws require “parity” between physical health and mental health benefits, most insurance companies will not pay for wellness checks.

 Most folks go with the principle, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Ahh, denial and ignorance is bliss. What you can do is monitor your children’s bouts with physical illness. Do they seem to catch everything that is going around? Are they more susceptible to influenza than other children? Do they seem particularly mopey a lot of the time?

 The link between physical health and mental health symptoms is our body’s immune system. Think of the immune system as a futuristic “force field” around our bodies. We are attacked by more than 3000 airborne viruses every day! Every day!! Thankfully, almost all of them bounce off that force field called our immune system.

 Now, when a person’s physical health is at risk, the effectiveness of their immune system goes down. Similarly, when a person’s mental health is at risk, their immune system goes down. So, people with mental health issues tend to get physically sicker than people without mental health issues.

 The key is preventive care. This will lead to positive check-ups both physically and mentally. Such preventive care includes getting restful sleep, adults at least 7 ½ hours/night, kids up to 10 hours/night. Also, eat right, three meals a day, balanced with protein, carbs, and lots of green, leafy veggies (the proverbial “brain food”). Finally, get off your butt. Regular exercise and/or activity not only makes your body more efficient, it burns off anxiety and is an antidote for depression. For children, I can’t say enough about structured sports activity, whether its school or recreational sports teams. Studies are very clear that such activities improve children’s self-esteem, responsibility, social activity, and general, positive character traits.

 Is it a good idea to also get mental wellness checks? By all means yes. Good for you and for your family. Also, make a family plan for preventive care to keep the immune system operating at peak capacity.