

# insights

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## The Toxic Effect of Stress on ADHD and LD Students

**Substantial educational and mental health resources are devoted to helping students who struggle with neurocognitive challenges such as ADHD and Learning Disabilities. Yet, according to neuropsychologist Jerome Schultz, PhD, we still may be missing a large part of what these students need to succeed academically, and in life.**

In his book, *Nowhere to Hide: Why Kids with ADHD and LD Hate School and What We Can Do About It* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2011), Dr. Schultz describes the cycle of chronic stress that develops in these students given their experience of failure and frustration in school. These children rarely understand the nature of their neurocognitive vulnerabilities, and early on develop the belief that they are stupid, inadequate, and incompetent. This internal belief system, combined with feedback from the environment that they do not measure up, that they are troublemakers, that they are unmotivated, causes students to feel psychologically unsafe in school, and creates a state of chronic stress.

Stress occurs in an individual when an event or situation (a stressor) threatens safety. Humans are genetically programmed to respond to perceived danger with the fight-flight response. The body's sympathetic nervous system responds in a way to maximize survival, by freezing (playing dead), fighting, or fleeing. The stress response includes the release of adrenalin and cortisol, a quickening of heart rate and respiration, sweating, pupil dilation, a rise in blood pressure, and muscles tensed for action. These body changes are meant to facilitate an immediate response – to swerve away from an obstacle in the road, to escape a burning building, to fight off a potential attacker. But, too often in modern life, people perceive threat and react with the stress response even in the absence of life-threatening situations.

The constant triggering of the stress response can cause wear-and-tear damage to multiple body systems, as well as structural changes in the brain that impact memory, executive function and emotions. These brain changes put ADHD and LD students at greater risk, making it even more difficult for them to focus, self-regulate, and retain information.

In a chronic state of fight-or-flight, they can exhibit aggressive, impulsive, or distracting/avoidant behaviors; they can “freeze” and refuse to do work in school or at home; they can withdraw and become depressed, irritable or fearful; and they can develop somatic symptoms.

The good news is that the effects of stress on the brain are almost always reversible. Dr. Schultz offers parents and teachers a wealth of ideas for helping these vulnerable students to de-stress and succeed:

- Help students understand the nature of their neurocognitive conditions so they can differentiate these challenges from their overall intelligence and ability to succeed; instill hope.
- Set a “competence anchor” by repeating tasks that the child has already mastered, to increase comfort and a sense of control when tackling new tasks.
- Reduce the threat, e.g. speak softly to an anxious student, kneel down beside her, make requests quietly rather than calling across the room.
- Encourage self-appraisal, then give the student your honest opinion: “how do you think you did compared with the best work you’ve done so far?” “I agree, this is not your personal best. How would you compare this to your best work?” ■

### For additional ideas, see:

Schultz, Jerome, J. (2014). *From Distress to De-Stress*. <http://www.cdl.org/articles/from-distress-to-de-stress/>

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