

Eight Ways to Encourage Resilience Through Optimized and Strategic Stress

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By: TrueSport

Caregivers often think their job is shielding athletes from all stress. But board-certified family physician and TrueSport Expert, Deborah Gilboa, MD, says stress is a vital tool for building resilience. Instead of avoiding it, help athletes embrace stress strategically to grow mentally, emotionally and physically. Here, Gilboa is sharing her roadmap to helping your athlete work through stress in a beneficial way.

Stress Doesn't Mean Bad Parenting

A stressed athlete doesn't signal failure on your part. "Your athlete feeling stressed is not evidence that you're a bad parent," Gilboa says. "We are fed this message as parents that if our child is stressed, we've made some error somewhere: We've let them make a bad decision, or we let them be on a team with a mean coach. But people need stress in order to thrive. Success is not congruent with a stress-free life."

Try to embrace these moments rather than feeling guilty or fixing everything.

Stress Isn't the Enemy

"Stress is not poison," Gilboa explains. "As a society, we have started to believe that if you're stressed, you must be making bad choices or are in a toxic relationship of some kind. We've been taught to believe that stress is always bad for you. But that's just not true." It's a normal response, like your heart racing from a tough workout.

We know that athletes only improve when they practice and when they push their limits. In fact, we actually expect coaches to stress our kids in smart, intentional ways that will make them stronger, not just for the sake of seeing them stress out, but because we know it leads to growth. The same principle applies to emotional and mental stress: There is an optimal amount that leads to growth.

Find Their Optimal Stress Range

As a caregiver, your goal is to help athletes stay in their "Goldilocks zone" of stress — not too little, not too much. "Think of stress like you think of water: If you have too little water for too long, you can die. But if you have too much water too fast, you can also die," Gilboa says. "We need water to

survive and somewhere between a few drops and a couple of gallons of water is the physiologic range — meaning you can survive with that amount. But in the middle of that range is your optimal range, or the amount of water you need in order to feel and perform at your best."

Stress is exactly the same: there is an amount that you can survive with, and there's a smaller range in the middle of that where you thrive. "Too much stress, stress from too many directions or stress that's too prolonged can actually be fatal," says Gilboa. "But too little stress can also be fatal: You need just enough stress to keep you alive. For example, a kid who isn't stressed enough about house fires may not blow out the candles they lit before they go to bed. A kid who isn't stressed about staying safe while driving may be texting at the wheel. You need a tiny bit of stress to keep you alive."

Ideally, your stressors keep you focused on the things that matter most to you. And everyone's range for stress will be different: a child who is highly reactive or feels more easily oppressed by change may have a narrower range, while your other athlete can handle much more stress and is less bothered by small changes. Your goal as a caregiver is to help your athlete understand when they're in their optimal range, and when they've become overly stressed and need to dial it down.

Spot Early Stress Signs

Watch for "yellow flags" like irritability, sleep issues or distraction, which signal that your athlete is exiting their optimal range. "This is especially true for athletes who gets pushed out of their optimal range pretty quickly or easily or often, and you'll want to help them become an expert at recognizing their own early warning signs that they're getting outside of their optimal range," Gilboa says. "We're looking for the early warning signs, not the red flags like yelling at a teacher or walking out of practice. Yellow flags can be things like constantly scrolling on social media, continually running late to class or practice, forgetting to pack important things like lunch or even forgetting where they put keys or earbuds. More emotional signals could be a lack of motivation or procrastinating on homework."

Gilboa adds that early warning signs look different for everyone, so your goal is to help your athlete build a list of early warning signs that are true for them, not a generic list.

Analyze the Stressor

When your athlete is getting outside of their optimal stress range, you can help them work through their options for problem-solving, though Gilboa emphasizes that your goal should be to help, not to solve problems. In this role, it's critical that you take your athlete's stressors seriously. It's important for caregivers to understand that while they may not see the athlete's stressor as a legitimate reason to feel stressed, the athlete believes it, and therefore, it's real. "Believe them," says Gilboa. "If they say they're stressed, they're right."

Then, Gilboa recommends asking two questions: "First, ask them if this stress is avoidable or unavoidable," she says. "You're helping them realize if they have a choice here. Things like taking

an exam in class are unavoidable. But if the stress is coming from skating, quitting is an option. It may not be the best option or the one you would choose for your athlete, but it can be helpful for them to see where they have choices."

Next ask: "Is it useful or useless?" This question helps your athlete decide if dealing with this stress gets them closer to the life they want. "For example, if your athlete is in a fight with their friend but they still want that friend in their life, then working through the argument — even if it includes an uncomfortable conversation — is useful." Some stressors are avoidable but useful, while some are unavoidable. If the stress is avoidable but useful, then they simply need to decide on their goal and start to work towards that. If the stress is avoidable AND useless, it's good to make a plan to walk away.

Build a Coping List

In the same way you helped your athlete make a list of their early warning signs, help your athlete make a list of coping strategies. Options might include deep breaths, journaling, a snack or a walk — these strategies should be personalized and accessible via phone notes. "They can't always listen to music or go for a run, so they need a long list of strategies that help them move back into their optimal range no matter what setting they're in," Gilboa says.

Schedule Resilience Rest Days

In the same way a coach gives athletes rest days in their schedule in order to recover and repair and build muscle, regular low-stressor days for your athlete is a necessity. This can be hard when they're in school and playing multiple sports that involve weekend competitions or practices, but carving out time for mental recovery is key after harder periods in life.

Any time stress levels are higher than normal for a prolonged period of time, they often need some recovery time that matches the intensity of the stressor. After finals week, for example, Gilboa says that your athlete may need a non-cognitive stressor day, since mental stress was the primary driver during that week.

Let Them Struggle

Resilience grows through discomfort, not danger. "Stress and discomfort build resilience," Gilboa says. "Yes, make sure that your athlete is safe, and look into a situation if you're unsure if they're in discomfort or danger, but don't mistake discomfort for danger. Teach your athlete that stress leads to resilience. It's not always comfortable. But it's important to help your athlete navigate these moments strategically and build their resilience intentionally."

Takeaway

Stop seeing stress as your athlete's enemy, and rather, see it as a tool for growth. Help your athlete define their optimal range of stress and help them develop tools to keep their stress levels in that

optimal range. This can be done by working with your athlete to define their 'yellow flags,' signs that their stress levels are rising in ways that aren't going to be helpful. After that, help them create a list of stress-busting tools that they can use in different situations so that they are equipped to better handle stressful situations.

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