

## Lesson 3: Stress Management



Jennifer has an important test to take today, and her mother offers to drive her to school. On the way they get stuck in traffic. Jennifer wants to do well on the test, and she worries she will be late. The longer they sit in traffic, the more agitated she becomes. Her heart pounds and she begins to sweat. By the time she arrives at school her neck is sore, her hands are clammy, and she has a headache. Jennifer is experiencing **stress**.

**stress:** a state of strain and tension

**stressor:** any life event or life change that may cause stress

The traffic problems Jennifer experienced and her worries about being late for the test are called **stressors**. They triggered her body's *fight-or-flight* response, also called the *acute stress response*, which you learned about in Lesson 5 of Section 1.

Jennifer's symptoms can be explained by the surge of hormones that were released in response to the stress. Her heart is pounding because the hormones increased her heart rate and blood pressure so her muscles could have more oxygen and blood sugar. Jennifer is sweating for two reasons. Her body is trying to cool her muscles, and help them stay efficient. Her body is diverting blood away from her skin to her body's core.

In this lesson you will examine positive and negative stress, the relationship between change and stress, and healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with stress. You will also explore the feelings of sadness and anger as emotional reactions to stress.

# Positive and Negative Stress

A Canadian medical researcher, Dr. Hans Selye (1907-1982), was a pioneer in stress research. Dr. Selye referred to the fight-or-flight response as the alarm stage in a three-stage response called the general adaptation response. Following are the three stages in the general adaptation response:

- **Alarm stage.** During this stage the body prepares for action, and people have more energy and strength than they ever knew they had.
- **Resistance stage.** The body tries to function normally again, but it takes energy to return to this normal state.
- **Exhaustion stage.** If stress continues long enough, people become exhausted.

Dr. Selye made a distinction between negative stress, which he called *distress*, and positive stress, which he called *eustress*.

A certain amount of stress is good for you. A moderate level of stress gives people the motivation and energy they need to achieve things. For example, stress helps students meet deadlines and perform well in tests. Studies have shown when students have too little stress, they underperform in tests. This may also explain why athletes often perform better in competition than in practice.

Everyone needs enough stress to keep going and to make life exciting, but too much stress can be harmful. When stress is too intense or lasts too long, people can feel **stress overload**. Stress overload can affect people in many ways:

- **Emotionally.** People may become irritable, angry, sad, anxious, depressed, or suicidal.
- **Physically.** People become exhausted, and they may develop digestive problems, headaches, or even chest pain.
- **Intellectually.** People have difficulty concentrating, and they may become forgetful or indecisive.
- **Behaviourally.** People may become accident-prone, change their eating or sleep patterns, engage in risky behaviour such as driving too fast, or make risky choices such as using drugs, gambling, smoking, or drinking.

1. With a partner or small group discuss times when you have been stressed. Give examples of both positive and negative stress. How did you react to these situations?

*stress overload:*  
high levels of stress that make people unproductive and ill



Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.

## Change and Stress



Researchers have discovered that anything that causes a change in your life causes stress. Even anticipating a change can be stressful. The change may be positive or negative; it is still stressful.



Psychiatrist Thomas Holmes and coworker Richard Rahe at the University of Washington in Seattle focused on identifying how much stress is too much. They developed a scale of 43 life events and ranked each. Go to the following website and find the “Stress Scale for Youth” near the bottom of the page.

[http://www.teentouch.org/coping\\_stress.asp](http://www.teentouch.org/coping_stress.asp)

2. Which life events received a rating of 40 or more on the “Stress Scale for Youth”?
3. Were you surprised at how stressful some of the life events on the “Stress Scale for Youth” are? Explain.

**Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.**

## Endings and New Beginnings

A major life change involves three stages:

- Something ends—a loss.
- You feel confused. The people involved react emotionally (and sometimes physically) to the loss.
- A new beginning occurs.

When people talk about losses, they usually are referring to tragic life events such as a death. Sometimes, good life changes are losses too. Consider the example that follows.

Graduation from high school can be a loss; graduation marks an important transition. It often means moving to a new town to go to university or college, and that change impacts your relationships with family and friends you must leave behind. With the anticipation of a major change, graduation often makes people feel stressed, afraid, or sad.

All changes also mean new beginnings. In the graduation example, the change involves a new stage in your life when you will become more independent, meet new friends, and learn new things.



**Mr. Romanchuk:** Change is a natural part of life. It is part of every relationship. Think about some of your relationships. Do you have the same friends now that you had in elementary school or junior high?

**Jamal:** No, I moved to a different city when I was in grade 5. I kept in contact with my friends for a while but then I made new friends and eventually lost touch with my old ones.

**Ashley:** Two of my friends are the same ones that I had in elementary school but when I got into high school I got involved with the drama club and they didn't. So I don't see them much now. I hang out with kids from the drama club.

**Mr. Romanchuk:** The changes in your relationships reflect the three stages of change. Over the next few years, you will experience many such changes as you leave school and pursue new interests.

The article that follows contains case studies of changing relationships. Recognizing the changes that take place can help you deal with changes in your own relationships and the stress that goes with changes.

## When Relationships Go Bad (or go differently)

Sometimes the relationship that you think is almost perfect takes a nose dive. Relationships can go bad. They can also just “go different” from what they were before. It happens to the best of us. It happens in every relationship—it seems that life is a series of ups and downs. The people in these relationships know all too well that relationships can change.

### Darla's Dad

Darla got up earlier than usual. She wanted to have breakfast with her father one last time. It would be three months before she would be back home for the Christmas break. Her father said he was surprised that she knew there were two 6:30s in the day, but he was really pleased to see her. Even though Darla's father knew that she was well organized and independent, he worried about her leaving home to attend university. Now he would have a chance to have a chat with her.

### Murray and Ellen

Murray stood waiting at the front of the synagogue. Every couple of minutes he turned to see if Ellen had arrived. “Still no sign of her,” he thought as he scanned his best man, future brother-in-law, and parents. “I hope she doesn't do this tomorrow during the real ceremony.”

At last Ellen and her father appeared and began moving down the aisle. The rabbi explained what would happen during the ceremony, a few questions were asked, and then they were off to a family dinner. Murray felt both happy and sad. He was marrying someone he deeply cared about which made him happy. But he also knew that once he had moved from home, he would never have quite the same relationship with

his father, mother, and older brothers. He would have other responsibilities and less time to spend with his family.

### Syd and Tom

Syd and Tom have been good friends since grade four. Now they seemed to be growing apart. Syd was becoming more interested in earning money, buying a car, and planning his future. Tom still wanted to go to the movies on their usual Friday night out but lately Syd preferred to use the VCR at home with another group of friends.

Syd has explained that having a group over to watch a movie was cheaper and still gave him a chance to spend time with friends. Tom wants to spend time with some friends who are more party-oriented. He has decided not to go over to Syd's home on this Friday evening. Perhaps some day he will be a little more like Syd, but right now he has other interests. Still, he will miss Syd's company on Friday nights.

### Nathan, Dave, and Debbie

Nathan and Dave have been friends since preschool. Now that Dave was married, he knew there would be changes in their friendship because he had more responsibilities and demands on his time. There would be less time for the two friends to spend together restoring their old cars.

Nathan, however, didn't seem to realize the difference. He continued to drop by. And he continued to arrange car show visits for Dave and himself without involving Debbie.

At first, Dave did not realize how much time he was spending with Nathan and how little he involved Debbie. He did not realize that anything was wrong until Debbie became angry one evening

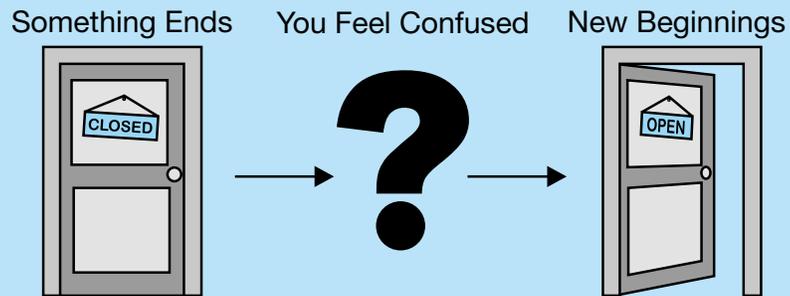
as Dave was leaving to meet Nathan at the garage.

### Ed and Lucy

If asked, Ed and Lucy would each have said that they knew where they would spend their first Christmas together. The problem was that they had never discussed the issue. Ed figured they would be with his parents for Christmas Day. Lucy planned their first Christmas alone with visits to both sets of parents on Boxing Day. On Christmas Eve, Ed

was surprised to see a turkey thawing on the kitchen counter of their apartment. Questioning was followed by an argument with the result that the first Christmas was memorable as their first major fight.

There are some things you can change and some things over which you have no control. These people need some advice. What suggestions can you make to them? What do you think they need to do?



4. With a partner or small group, discuss two of the case studies from the article. For each case study you discuss, suggest ways the people involved can deal with the changing relationship.

**Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.**

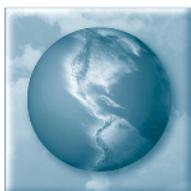
<sup>1</sup> "When Relationships Go Bad (or go differently)" taken from *Relationships* (Lifechoices Series) Campbell, Judith (Pearson Education Canada, 1996) 106-107. Reproduced with permission by Pearson Canada.

## Reacting to Stress

Many everyday situations cause stress—getting caught in traffic, being late, strained relationships. In addition, major life events—both happy and sad—cause stress. With graduation, a new relationship, a new job, the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, you will experience stress as you readjust to the changes in your life. Depending on how you adjust to these life changes, stress will help or hinder you.

Some people develop unhealthy coping techniques to deal with stress. For example, they may abuse drugs and alcohol. You will address these ways of reacting to stress in the next lesson.

An example of an extremely unhealthy way of dealing with stress is self-injury (also called self-harm or cutting). Self-injury occurs when an individual deliberately causes physical harm to herself or himself as a way of dealing with overwhelming emotions or situations. These individuals do not have healthy mechanisms for coping with stress.



For more information on self-injury, go to the following websites:

- [http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/mental\\_health/cutting.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/cutting.html)
- [http://www.youthnoise.com/page.php?page\\_id=1410](http://www.youthnoise.com/page.php?page_id=1410)



5. Using the information from the websites, briefly describe self-injury.
6. With a partner, brainstorm ways to help someone who self-injures.

**Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.**



The best way to deal with change is to manage the stress. Managing small everyday stressors is easier than managing the stressor of major life events; however, if you pay attention to your well-being, you will be better prepared for all types of stressors.

Following are some tips to ensure you will be better-prepared to meet life's challenges and changes:

- Build your physical reserves by making healthy food choices, being active, and getting enough sleep. If you are not physically well, you will find it harder to cope with stress.
- Limit your caffeine and alcohol intake, and don't use tobacco and illegal drugs.
- Learn relaxation exercises.
- Develop a good **support system**. Stress creates feelings you will want to talk about with family and friends. Sharing your emotions with people who support you can reduce your stress.

*support system: people, or groups of people, who provide others with emotional help and guidance*

## Coping With Stress

No matter how prepared you are, you will experience stressful events. Following are some tips for coping with stress:

- Identify the source of your stress. You won't know how to deal with your stress unless you identify what is causing it.
- Put events into perspective. Many stressors aren't worth worrying about. Give each event no more or no less attention than it deserves.
- Use positive self-talk.
- Use your support system.
- Release emotions. If you feel sad, tears may help you relieve the stress. If you feel angry, try releasing the emotion with exercise.
- Take a break from stressful situations. Listen to music, draw, write, read, or spend time with a pet to reduce stress.



**sociogram:**  
a diagram  
that shows  
interaction  
patterns  
among people

When you are stressed it helps to have people who will support you. Who are the people in your support network? One way to examine your support network is to make a **sociogram**.



Following are the steps for making a sociogram:

**Step 1:** Draw a circle in the middle of a sheet of paper. Write your name in the middle of the circle.

**Step 2:** Around the circle write the names of as many friends, family members, or acquaintances as you can.

**Step 3:** Which of the people listed can you most always count on for support? Draw solid lines between your name and these names.

**Step 4:** Which of these people can you sometimes count on for support? Draw dotted lines between your name and these names.

7. Make a sociogram that illustrates the people you interact with—family members, friends, and others in your community. Then use the sociogram to answer the following questions:
  - a. Do you have a number of people you can turn to for support?
  - b. How would you categorize the people in your support system? Are they family members, friends, teachers, or other significant people in your life?
  - c. What can you do to strengthen your support network?
  - d. Are you part of someone else's support system?

**Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.**

## Sadness

When some individuals are under stress, they turn the stress inward and express it as sadness. Sadness is a normal emotion, which people experience throughout their lives.

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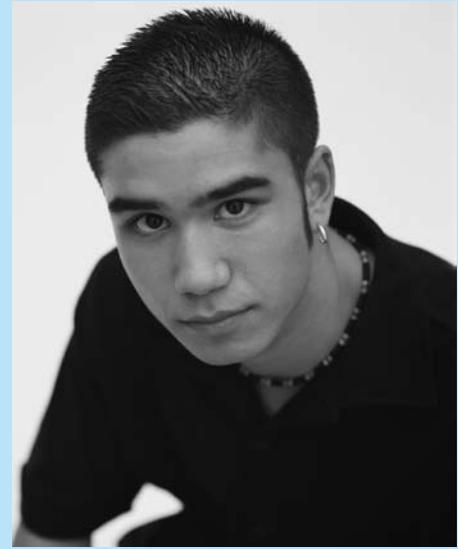
## Suicidal Feelings

The article “Why Am I so Sad?” touches on a very serious topic—suicidal thoughts and feelings. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in young people aged 15 to 24 in Canada. There is one teen suicide every twelve hours in Canada and two attempts every five minutes. Moreover, suicide occurs more often among First Nations and Inuit youth than non-Aboriginal youth in Canada.

Youth suicide is an urgent issue for First Nations and Inuit youth in Canada. While there is much variation among communities, overall rates are high.

- Suicide rates are five to seven times higher for First Nations youth than for non-Aboriginal youth.
- Suicide rates among Inuit youth are among the highest in the world, at 11 times the national average.

Suicide is a problem that not only affects youth but impacts the whole community. The ripple effect of trauma is powerful in small, close-knit Aboriginal communities, possibly accounting for suicide clusters. For many First Nations and Inuit youth, the root causes of suicide go much deeper to factors beyond an individual’s control. For some, suicide becomes a means of escape when there are few alternative choices available.



9. With a partner or small group, generate a list of reasons why teens might contemplate suicide.

**Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.**



Take the Suicide Myths and Realities Quiz at the following website:

**[http://www.needcrisis.bc.ca/html/suicide/suicide\\_quiz.htm](http://www.needcrisis.bc.ca/html/suicide/suicide_quiz.htm)**

<sup>1</sup> “Addressing Youth Suicide Prevention,” <[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/promotion/suicide/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/promotion/suicide/index_e.html)> (13 September 2007). Reproduced by permission of Health Canada.



Not everyone who is depressed tries to commit suicide. Likewise not everyone who is suicidal is depressed. Even so, depression may produce thoughts of suicide.

Some suicidal people provide warning signals such as withdrawing from family and friends; having sudden changes in behaviour; showing signs of sadness, hopelessness, and irritability; giving away personal belongings; being preoccupied with songs, poems, or movies dealing with death; and placing personal affairs in order. If these signals are recognized, people who are thinking about suicide and feeling suicidal can get help. School counsellors, clergy, and health-care people such as doctors and social workers are usually trained to work with people who are thinking about suicide.

If you think one of your friends or family members might be suicidal, you can do the following:

- Take the situation seriously. Avoid changing the topic. Don't suggest self-medicating with alcohol or drugs as a solution. Prescription drugs can be useful but only under the supervision of a medical doctor.
- Talk to the person. Most of the time, people who are considering suicide are willing to discuss it if someone asks them out of concern. Listen to your friend without judging and reassure him or her that you're there and you care. Make comments like the following:
  - I want to hear about what is bothering you.
  - You are really important to me.
  - Let's talk and try to make things better for you.
  - Things get tough sometimes, but that will change.
  - I'd feel awful if you harmed yourself.
  - If I can't help you, I can find someone who can.
- Give this person the number of a support service and make sure that he or she makes the call.
- If the person refuses help, as soon as possible inform a professional who can help that person.



The Centre for Suicide Prevention (a program of the Canadian Mental Health Association) is not a crisis centre, but it is a source of useful information on suicide and suicidal behaviour. Following is the address for the centre's website:

**<http://www.suicideinfo.ca/csp/go.aspx?tabid=77>**

If you are in crisis or know someone who is, the Centre for Suicide Prevention website has a list of telephone numbers that you can contact.

In case of emergency, telephone 911. The 911 operators are available 24 hours a day, and they will provide intervention for people who have already hurt themselves or are at high risk to do so.

## Grief

Throughout your life, you may experience many different kinds of losses—a friendship, a job, a home. These are just three possibilities. Perhaps the most profound loss you could experience is the death of someone you love. Losing someone can be a huge blow, and you may experience many powerful emotions.



Grieving can take many forms; for everyone it is different. Some people grieve very openly; others grieve more privately. The grief may last only a brief period of time for some, or a long time for others. Everyone needs to go through a grieving process, because it is necessary for resolving the grief and for emotional healing.

Some experiences in the process of grieving are commonly felt by many people. Following are the four stages people pass through while grieving:



- **Disbelief or denial.** In this stage, the death is denied. The disbelief can last a few minutes to a few days. The person may cry a lot or seem numb and in shock. If this stage goes on for too long, it could be a problem.
- **Anger.** During this stage, the grieving person feels angry or resentful at being abandoned by the deceased person. Feelings of guilt about feeling angry can arise. The grieving person may dwell on past arguments with the dead person or wish he or she had behaved differently toward the person.
- **Bargaining or blame.** During this stage, the grieving person tries to find and explain a reason for the death. Statements such as the following are common:
  - “If only I had...”
  - “I should have...”
  - “I promise I will...”
- **Acceptance.** At this stage, the grieving person accepts the death. It doesn’t mean that he or she doesn’t care anymore, has forgotten the person who died, or is now happy with the death. It means life can go on in a more or less stable way.

The length of time spent on each stage differs with each person. It depends on how a person expresses grief and on how close he or she was to the deceased. Some can take a short time and others can take a long time. However long the grieving process takes, it must be completed before emotional healing can occur.



For more information on grief, go to the following website:

[http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/emotions/someone\\_died.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/someone_died.html)



10. Sam is grieving because his sister was killed in a car accident. With a partner or small group brainstorm some activities that might help Sam better cope with his loss.

Compare your answers with the Suggested Responses at the end of the lesson.

## Anger

When some individuals are under stress, they turn the stress outward and express it as anger. Feeling angry at times is normal and healthy; however, problems arise when anger is not handled appropriately.

You may have witnessed people displaying road rage or you may have seen media reports of students shooting their classmates and teachers. These are extreme examples of people turning their stress outward in anger.

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Go to page 7 of Assignment Booklet 1B and respond to questions 4, 5, and 6 of Section 2.

## Looking Back; Looking Ahead

In this lesson you examined positive and negative stress, the impact of change on stress, and ways to manage stress. You also explored two strong emotional reactions to stress—sadness and anger. In the next lesson you will explore the use and abuse of three substances—tobacco, alcohol and drugs—and how they impact your health.

# Glossary

**sociogram:** a diagram that shows interaction patterns among people

**stress:** a state of strain and tension

**stressor:** any life event or life change that may cause stress

**stress overload:** high levels of stress that make people unproductive and ill

**support system:** people or groups of people who provide others with emotional help and guidance

## Suggested Responses

1. Examples of positive and negative stress will, of course, be personal. What is positive stress for one person may be negative stress for another. For example, you may find taking part in a formal debate a stimulating and challenging experience (positive stress) while another person may feel intimidated or overwhelmed by such an experience (negative stress). Following is one student's response:

For me, positive stress was the experience of climbing a mountain. When I met the challenge of getting to the top, I felt euphoric and proud of my accomplishment. An example of negative stress was being bullied. When nothing I tried seemed to work, I felt distressed. I felt frightened.

2.

Life Event	Rating
Death of spouse, parent, boy/girlfriend	100
Divorce (of yourself or your parents)	65
Puberty	65
Pregnancy (or causing pregnancy)	65
Marital separation, or break-up with boy/girlfriend	60
Jail term or probation	60
Death of family member other than spouse, parent, or boy/girlfriend	60
Broken engagement	55
Engagement	50
Serious personal injury or illness	45
Marriage	45
Entering college or starting next level of school (junior high or high school)	45
Change in independence or responsibility	45
Any drug and/or alcohol use	45
Fired from work or expelled from school	45
Change in alcohol or drug use	45
Reconciliation (getting back together) with mate, family or boy/girlfriend	40
Trouble at school	40
Serious health problem of a family member	40

3. Answers will vary. You may have been surprised at how stressful the following life events are: becoming engaged, getting married, and entering college or starting the next level of school. They are examples of positive stress because when you do adjust and adapt, you feel competent, challenged, and satisfied with your ability to cope.
4. Answers will vary depending on which case studies were discussed. The people involved must first recognize that the relationship is changing and adjustments have to be made. They need to discuss the change with those in the relationship. It may be a difficult subject to bring up but being open about the change and the feelings connected to it is usually the best policy.
5. Self-injury is a way some people try to deal with intense emotional pain or pressure. People who self-injure do not have healthy methods of coping with stress. Self-injury is an attempt to feel better. People who self-injure do not usually intend to hurt themselves permanently nor do they intend to keep on self-injuring once they start. However, like drug and alcohol abuse, self-injury can become addictive.
6. Responses will vary. Following are some suggestions made by a group of students:
  - Become informed about self-injury before talking to the person.
  - Don't be judgmental. Make it clear that it's okay to talk about the person's self-injury. Offer support but don't ask probing questions; let the person express what he or she is comfortable talking about.
  - Don't see stopping the self-injury as the primary goal. Helping the person deal with the emotions is the important thing. If the person doesn't have another way of coping with the stress, he or she may turn to another unhealthy way of managing stress, for example drug or alcohol abuse.
  - Encourage the person to seek professional help. You might offer to help him or her find professional help.
7.
  - a. Responses will vary. Most people think of family members and close friends as a support network. Community resources such as counsellors and health professionals might also be part of your support network.
  - b. Responses will be personal. Which category in your support network has the most people?
  - c. You might try to strengthen relationships with family members or friends in your support network. You might also seek out community resources that can give you support. You may have other suggestions.
  - d. In all likelihood, you are part of someone else's support system. Think about your relationships with family members and friends. Are you "there" when family and friends want to talk? If so, you are providing support.

8. Depression is more serious than sadness. Sadness is a normal human emotion that occurs when someone experiences a loss. It is relatively short-term. The source of sadness is identifiable, and in time, the feeling of sorrow will go away. Depression occurs when feelings of sadness persist for too long and interfere with the ability to enjoy life. Depression is a long-term sense of hopelessness not necessarily caused by a particular event.
9. Answers will vary. Following are some possible reasons:
- pressures to succeed
  - problems at home, at school, at work, in sports, or in a relationship
  - trouble with the law
  - despair because of bullying; feeling victimized
10. Following are some strategies that might help Sam better cope with his loss:
- **Peer support.** He may find it helpful to get together with other teens and discuss what happened, share his thoughts, and try to make sense of events.
  - **Journal writing.** He may benefit from writing his thoughts and feelings in a journal or diary.
  - **Relaxing activities.** He may benefit from relaxing activities such as reading, listening to music, taking a walk, or bike riding.
  - **Recreational activities.** He may find it helpful to return to previous fun activities. Being active physically helps reduce stress and makes people feel better.
11. While depression and anger might seem as though they are opposites, the underlying emotions are often the same. People who are angry seem to be fighters; they are often intense, loud, and aggressive. People who are experiencing depression may appear passive and seem to have given up the fight. In each case, however, the feelings beneath the surface are painful emotions. One way of defining depression is to call it “anger turned inward.” Some people, especially those who are introverted, bottle up their feelings of anger and depression instead of expressing them in appropriate ways.

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