

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Introduction for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists	1
Chapter 1	9
What Makes Me Stressed?	
Chapter 2	31
The Science of Stress	
Chapter 3	47
Relaxation Part 1: Relaxing My Body	
Chapter 4	61
Relaxation Part 2: Relaxing My Mind	
Chapter 5	69
Flexible Thinking	
Chapter 6	83
Problem Solving	
Chapter 7	93
Getting Organized	
Chapter 8	103
Being Healthy	
Chapter 9	115
Getting Along With Other Kids	
Chapter 10	125
Using My Strengths	
Conclusion and Celebration	131
Bibliography and Resources	134

Dedication

For My Three Sons



Acknowledgments

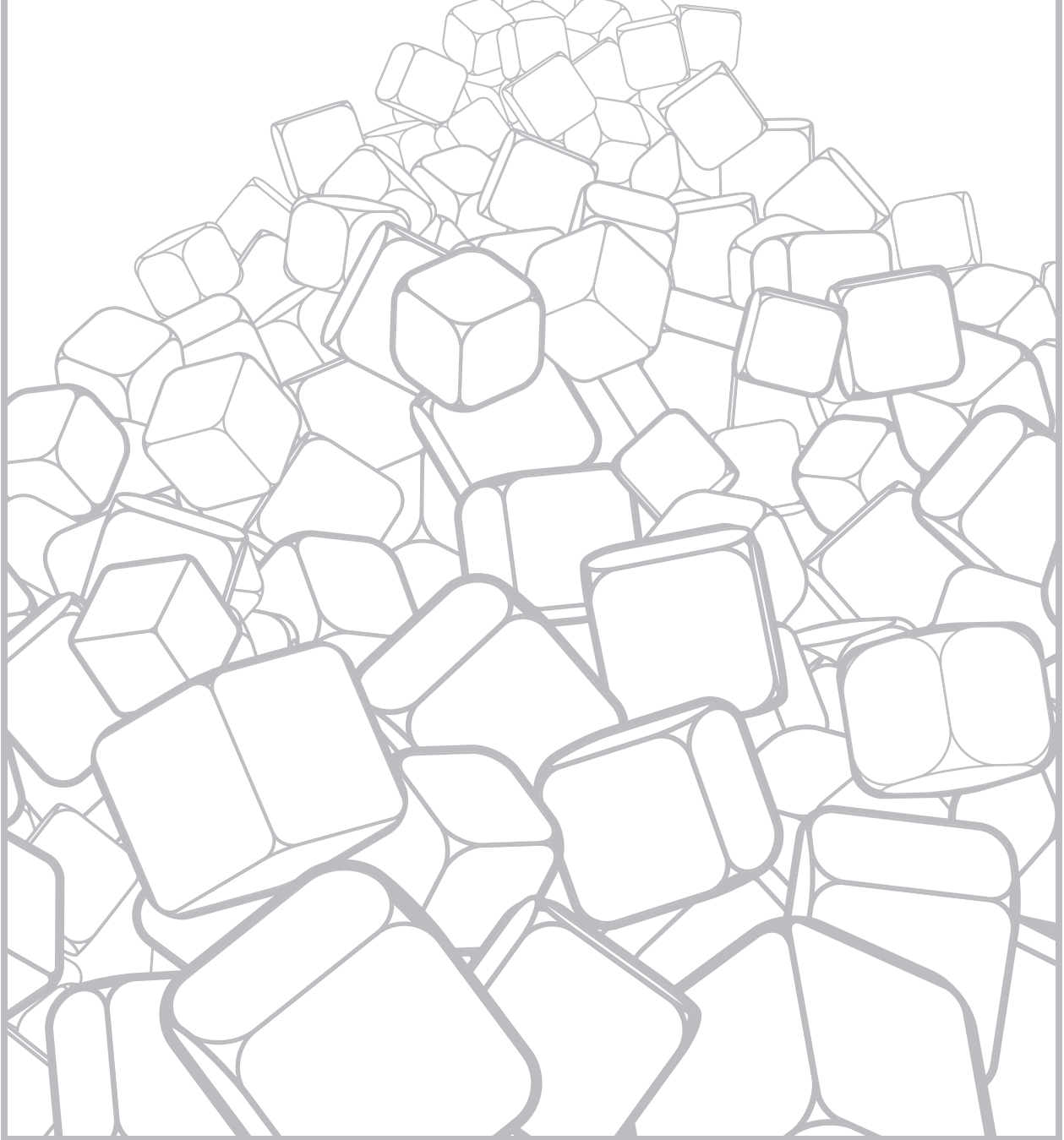
The children that I work with have been the source of inspiration for this book. Their intelligence, wit, and enthusiasm truly make it easy for me to come to “work” each day. For that I am eternally grateful. Sincere appreciation and admiration is also owed to the parents that I work with. Their care and drive to effect change have improved the quality of life for all children who face challenges.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr. Walter Rosenfeld and Teri Criscione of Goryeb Children’s Hospital for allowing me the freedom to develop the types of clinical programs that help to address the needs expressed in this book. Also from Goryeb Children’s Hospital, I would like to acknowledge the Child Development Center and the Department of Pediatric Neurology for their endless enthusiasm and support.

I would like to thank Kirsten McBride and her editorial team at AAPC Publishing for their astute insights and recommendations. Special thanks and admiration goes to Virginia Bidulph for her assistance and dedication during the latter stages of the publication process. I would also like to thank all who reviewed my manuscript, including Harvey Bennett, MD, Kathy Selvaggi-Fadden, MD, Tosan Livingstone, MD, Janet Oberman, PhD, Carolyn Hayer of the New Jersey Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, and Martha Brecher, education advocate. Particular thanks to Margaret Hefferle of New Jersey Special Child Health Services for assisting with the review process as well as for her tireless devotion to helping families in need.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Heartfelt gratitude to my wife, Angela, for her enthusiastic promotion of the book even before it was half finished, and special thanks to my children, Kieran, Liam, and C  el, for being understanding when daddy goes to work to see “his kids.”

FOREWORD



Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool

Throughout this book, I can hear Chris Lynch calmly challenging children to face their fears and develop less rigid/more flexible thinking.

I have known Chris for over 20 years and during that time have had the privilege of watching an excellent clinician at work. He has always been a thoughtful and thorough psychologist in the clinical situation. During his career Chris worked in Ireland for five years, developing a national reputation for himself and his work with individuals with Asperger Syndrome. On returning to the United States, he has built a practice of individual and group therapy that emphasizes practical coping strategies. His clinical program, ASPIRATIONS, not only works on social skills that so many children need but also that critical piece involving social anxiety. He understands the children with whom he interacts in an uncanny way and can engage them in fun, practical solutions for coping with their situations.

Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool is filled with practical and kid-friendly exercises that I've seen work. For example, factual explanations about the body's reaction to stress help the reader to understand why relaxation techniques can work to conquer fears. Chris also identifies coping strategies that use visual learning techniques to cater to most children's needs.

Friendship circles, sensory sensitivities, bullying, and even an exercise on how to create your own school are topics that are recognized by every child. The book can be read independently by a child, but the adult can learn tips as well.

Enjoy the penguin and earn those ice blocks to make your strong igloo!

– *Kathleen Selvaggi Fadden, MD, medical director, Child Development Center, Goryeb Children's Hospital*

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND THERAPISTS



Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool

This book is designed for the child who has social, emotional, and/or sensory sensitivities. In parenting, teaching, and working with such kids, we often emphasize the learning of skills. This is only natural. We want our children, our students, and our clients to learn the skills that will help them to reach their potential in life. Some of the skill areas that we spend countless hours working on include social skills, fine- and gross-motor skills, skills to enhance sensory integration, language skills, and academic skills.

All of these skills are valuable and necessary, but stress management skills are often sorely missing from the list of things we teach to our kids. This is unfortunate given the wide range of problems that stress can cause. Stress can create challenges for learning and daily living. Stress also creates distress and can lead to meltdowns and behavioral outbursts.

The problem for children with sensitivities is twofold:

1. They are often vulnerable to multiple sources of stress due to their sensitivities.
2. They often lack the emotional resources to cope with this stress.

Children with sensitivities may consider as stressful a range of situations that for many other kids would not be a problem. Examples of situations that may be stressful for the sensitive child include:

- ☞ *A child who is a very fussy eater is forced to sit next to someone eating raw octopus*
- ☞ *A child who is sensitive to noise is reading quietly in the library when suddenly the fire alarm goes off*
- ☞ *A child who is a master at recalling facts is given a test that asks for his opinion*
- ☞ *A child who has difficulty making friends is rushed into a room full of kids she doesn't know*
- ☞ *A child is asked to come downstairs immediately while he is in the middle of counting up points from his collection of fantasy-game playing cards*
- ☞ *A child who is used to going to school via the same route every day must unexpectedly change her route due to road works*
- ☞ *A student who is reciting facts about ancient Roman battles is asked by the teacher to change the topic*

Any one of these situations may result in significant stress and anxiety for a highly sensitive child. Parents, teachers, and therapists often spend a significant amount of their own energy on trying to address these difficulties. In fact, trying to ease stress and anxiety may

Introduction for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists

take up more time and energy than anything else they do. Consider the amount of time spent on reassuring and redirecting a child when he or she is in “panic mode.” In addition, consider the amount of energy spent on trying to prevent stressful situations from occurring in the first place, or on trying to prepare the sensitive child for situations that cannot be prevented.

Who This Book Is For

This book is intended for children who have some type of inborn sensitivity. Sensitivities may be emotional, sensory, or social in nature. With regard to age, the book is intended for children ages 8 to 13 (grades 3 through middle school), but this may vary depending upon the child’s level of conceptual understanding. The child may have an identifiable condition with a diagnosis (for example, autism spectrum disorder, bipolar disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], and anxiety disorders), or he or she may not.

Despite the differences that children with sensitivities may have, they tend to share a number of characteristics that make them prone to stress and anxiety. Some of these characteristics include:

- ☞ Inflexible thought processing (everything is either black or white)
- ☞ Difficulty with regulating sensory input (sound, light, tastes, etc.)
- ☞ Social awkwardness (difficulties reading social cues, poor eye contact, etc.)
- ☞ Overall high intelligence but much better at memorizing facts than understanding concepts
- ☞ Difficulty with managing frustration (experiencing meltdowns when overwhelmed)
- ☞ High levels of anxiety
- ☞ A strong need for structure and routine
- ☞ Tendencies to “fixate” on particular topics of interest
- ☞ Poor “executive function” skills (organizing, planning, and adjusting to transitions)

Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool

The Purpose of This Book

As parents, teachers, and therapists you play an important role in helping children to manage stress. However, it is crucial that children develop skills to help them to manage their own stress *as independently as possible*. Despite all of our planning and programming, we cannot prevent children from encountering stressful situations. In addition, there will not always be a supportive person nearby who is able to jump in and resolve a stressful situation. Therefore, it is vital that the child learn and practice stress management skills that he or she can use when called for. This doesn't replace your important role. Instead, it adds to the child's growth and independence.

The goal of increasing independence for kids with sensitivities has shaped the format of this book. This workbook is meant to be read, completed, and used as much as possible by children. Your children, students, or clients should feel that this is "their" book. Certainly, some assistance may be called for in understanding and completing the chapters. However, the emphasis is always on the child's individual experience and the development of strategies that will work based on how he or she feels. The degree to which you will need to be involved depends upon your specific circumstances. Some general guidelines are as follows.

Parents

The degree to which you will need to assist your child depends upon such factors as the child's age, level of conceptual understanding, and motivation. Kids with sensitivities are often well aware of their stress and anxieties. Fortunately, they are also very motivated to learn and apply strategies *if they believe it will make them feel better*.

To help with understanding and motivation, the stress management principles in this book are presented in factual/scientific terms. I find that this makes learning more appealing for kids with sensitivities (since they tend to prefer concrete, factually based knowledge). If your child seems to be struggling with some of the concepts or assignments and is willing to let you assist, by all means do so. If your child can complete the book independently, it may still be beneficial for you to go over the material, provided that he or she is willing to share (I suggest gently encouraging this). This way you can prompt and remind your child to use the strategies that he or she has learned. If your child is unwilling to complete the book, don't force him or her to. In such cases, it may be best to allow your child to come to the material when he or she is ready.

To further help with motivation, the book is set up so that the child will earn two ice blocks at the end of each chapter. These ice blocks are used to build a stress management igloo. Your child will see the progress made on the igloo at the end of each chapter. An igloo is a strong

Introduction for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists

structure that can help someone withstand the elements. Your child's stress management igloo will help him or her to withstand sources of stress that inevitably come up in life. At the end of the book, the child receives a certificate that includes a complete igloo that he or she can color or design. Your child may want to post this certificate in a place where it can serve as a reminder to use the tools he or she has learned.

Teachers

It is my belief that stress management should be taught in all schools to all kids (whether or not they have sensitivities). If you are teaching in self-contained classes or special schools, you may be able to incorporate the book into your curriculum. Members of your school's multidisciplinary team may also be willing and able to become involved. If you are teaching general education classes, you can still teach many of the principles of the book to all of your students. However, you may need to adjust references to issues that are directly relevant for the child with emotional, social, or sensory sensitivities.

Therapists

This book can easily be used as a template for group or individual therapy sessions. I devote a significant portion of the groups that I run for kids to completing the book. The speed with which you complete chapters will vary depending upon your clients' age and level of conceptual understanding. As noted above, the book is intended for children ages 8 through 13, but this general age range may be extended in particular circumstances. While it may be permissible to change the order of the presentation, I highly recommend completing Chapters 1 through 4 first, in order, as they set the stage for understanding stress management and lay down some of the fundamental strategies.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: What Makes Me Stressed?

This chapter helps the reader to understand what stress is and how it relates to having some type of sensitivity. Throughout the book, emphasis is given to the idea that children have strengths as well as areas of need. The areas of need introduced in this chapter include rigid thought patterns, social skills difficulties, sensory sensitivities, school-related concerns, and having different talents and interests.

Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool

Chapter 2: The Science of Stress

This chapter explains stress from a scientific perspective. I find that kids with sensitivities find such explanations appealing and motivating. Six crucial concepts are covered: 1. Stress is something that has a real effect on mind and body. 2. Stress can happen from any change, whether good or bad. 3. Stress can arise from both real and imagined events. 4. Some stress is beneficial. 5. Too much stress can be detrimental. And 6. Stress can be managed.

Chapter 3: Relaxation Part 1: Relaxing My Body

In this and the following chapter, relaxation training is broken up into two parts. Chapter 3 emphasizes learning how to relax by addressing the body's physical reaction to stress. Particular attention is devoted to breathing and muscle relaxation strategies.

Chapter 4: Relaxation Part 2: Relaxing My Mind

In this second part of relaxation training, the reader learns how to relax through mental strategies. Particular attention is devoted to the use of imagery and meditation.

Chapter 5: Flexible Thinking

Rigid thinking, especially in relation to stress, is a hallmark characteristic of kids who have sensitivities. In this chapter, the reader learns how to identify when he or she is thinking too rigidly. The reader then learns to apply more adaptive and flexible ways of evaluating and responding to stressful situations.

Chapter 6: Problem Solving

This chapter teaches a method for evaluating and solving problems effectively. Specifically, a system for breaking down problem solving into concrete and manageable components is taught. To heighten motivation and understanding, the problem-solving strategies presented in this book are methodical and make use of visual supports.

Introduction for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists

Chapter 7: Getting Organized

Many kids who have sensory, emotional, or social sensitivities also have difficulty with executive function skills. These are the skills required for planning, prioritizing, and organizing. Such skills are addressed in this chapter. The chapter is broken down into three areas that are impacted by executive function: organizing belongings, learning how to prioritize, and time management.

Chapter 8: Being Healthy

Being healthy helps us to withstand stress better, both physically and mentally. Healthy habits are emphasized in this chapter. Four important areas are covered: eating habits, exercise, sleep, and physical health.

Chapter 9: Getting Along With Other Kids

Several socially related issues often result in stress for kids. Although this isn't a social skills book, this chapter provides guidance in three socially related areas: meeting new people, making friends, and dealing with bullies.

Chapter 10: Using My Strengths

The final chapter helps to highlight the different areas of strength that children can draw from in times of stress. This includes relishing one's talents, getting support from other people, and finding strength in one's belief system.