

Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency

A Resource for Grades 9-12



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*"Success in school depends on a student's ability to somehow decrease their stress. The inclusion of stress management techniques into the curriculum is an obvious application of neuroscience to education that can improve learning, emotional well-being, and physical health. Teachers can use their warmth, empathic caring and positive regard to create a state of mind that decreases fear and increases neuroplasticity and learning."*¹

Cozolino, I., 2013

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Foreword

Stress is something we all have – and while it can be helpful in some instances, young people tell us that they are experiencing a lot of stress, and want to learn how to better manage it. They want an open dialogue with their teachers and other caring adults, about how to manage the stressors they face both inside and outside of school.

Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency provides teens and educators with an opportunity to promote well-being, dialogue and learning, that is directly tied to curriculum. The learning activities are flexible and can be used to benefit the whole school, individual classrooms, or a small group of students. They can also be used by parents, and one-on-one with individual students.

Grounded in cognitive behavioural strategies, Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency helps teens focus on how both good and bad stress impacts their body physically, emotionally and cognitively. The activities encourage students to problem solve and develop a toolbox of psychologically-sound strategies that can help them be resilient when faced with life's stressors.

As the Mental Health Lead and Chief Psychologist of a school board, I have incorporated the Kids Have Stress Too!® and Stress Lessons programs and resources for educators and parents into our board's mental health strategy. These evidence-informed resources promote healthy living, resiliency, and well-being, and can be part of promoting mental health literacy, and mentally-healthy classrooms and school environments. The resources can be downloaded from the Psychology Foundation of Canada website, psychologyfoundation.org.

I am excited to share the Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency program with our secondary educators and add to our menu of curriculum-linked resources for promoting mental health and learning. I hope you will find these resources as helpful as we have in promoting health and learning of young people in our district.

Dr. Deanna Swift,
Chief Psychologist and Mental Health Lead
Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board

Goals of the resource:

- To provide educators with a psychologically-sound Canadian learning resource that is relevant to a range of curriculum requirements
- To provide students with opportunities to develop skills and capacity for handling and harnessing stress, and enhancing their well-being.
- To help create healthy learning environments

"Making curriculum connections where appropriate provides relevant opportunities to build capacity among students to promote their own and their peers' mental health."

Supporting Minds,
Ontario Ministry of
Education, 2013

Introduction

Stress Lessons: Tools for Resiliency (Grades 9-12)

This resource is designed for education professionals, and their colleagues, who want to help teens develop resilience—the ability to not just survive but thrive in our exciting and stress-filled world.

This resource will help educators create “teachable moments” to introduce stress management strategies and skills and build emotional resiliency in their students and themselves. Featuring five “stress lessons” and a student-led “Stress Conference” demonstrating new knowledge and skills, this resource aligns with health and wellness related subject areas. Teachers of other subjects—Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, Math, Business, and Art—may also be interested in using or adapting parts of the resource to enhance their learning activities. Stress is, after all, a cross-curricular “human” subject—a language we all speak, an experience we can all learn, grow, and even benefit from if we embrace it in meaningful ways. [Click here^A](#) for a listing of specific curriculum links by province and territory.

Promoting the health and resiliency of young people requires a comprehensive effort that includes developing their health literacy (including how to manage life’s stressors), addressing the social and physical environment of the school, and creating links with the wider community. Accordingly, this resource also includes a variety of additional, research-backed activities and resources for school counsellors, administrators and parents/caregivers that are designed to complement classroom activities.

For a complete listing of all links used throughout this document, please see the [Appendix](#).

Interested in learning more about a comprehensive approach to promoting health in schools? Check out “[Comprehensive School Health in a Nutshell](#)”^B.



Learning Competencies

By engaging in the program activities (classroom-based, school-wide and individual) students will develop the following skills and competencies:

- Increased ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress in themselves and others
- Increased awareness of what stress “feels” like and a greater ability to detect / assess their stress levels
- Increased ability to identify individual stressors and their impact
- Increased ability to develop and implement positive coping and problem solving strategies to reduce the impact of stressors and return to a calm state
- Increased sense of well-being

Teachers play a vital role in the daily lives of students – they spend the most face-time and are most able to influence and set the tone of the classroom and provide key opportunities to learn about stress. The Psychology Foundation of Canada provides multiple resources for teachers to incorporate curriculum-linked approaches as well as whole-classroom strategies to address and support the development of resiliency and positive mental health in Preschool and Kindergarten, Grades 1-3, Grades 4-6, and Grades 7-9. For more on the work of The Psychology Foundation of Canada visit psychologyfoundation.org.



Educational approach and rationale

This resource is based on a constructivist educational approach that recognizes students come to school with previous knowledge, experience and skills related to stress they can share with others and build on within the classroom and broader school environment.

The program also embraces the value of peer support, as evidence suggests that teens in particular look to their peers (rather than the adults in their lives) when it comes to coping with stress³.

Did you know?

School connectedness refers to the extent to which students perceive that they are accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the educational environment. Research demonstrates that school connectedness is positively associated with students’ academic motivation, performance and adjustment. Similarly, school connectedness has been found to be related to students’ sense of belonging and self-esteem, whereas it has been negatively correlated with the presence of delinquency, oppositional behavior and high-risk health behaviors⁵.

Feedback from Stress Lessons:

Results from an evaluation of **From Stressed Out to Chilled Out** (for Grades 7-9) revealed that when invited to talk about and explore stress in a safe, caring environment, students felt listened to and cared about and, in turn, less stressed. Teachers noticed improvements in learning and relationships in the class after students had a chance to open up about how they feel about their lives, and learned more coping and stress management skills¹⁰.

Did you know...

When students are stressed, teachers can help them regain a sense of calm.

"We do this by softening our eyes, lowering our tone of voice, slowing our speech rhythm, relaxing our facial expression, gestures, posture."⁹

Shanker, S., 2017

For this reason the activities revolve around conversations between students about what matters to students, and encourages the development of skills that can help them communicate better with both peers and adults⁴.

Teachers are invited to play the role of facilitator, setting the stage for inquiry, working alongside students as they explore each "stress lesson" topic, build up their "resilience kits" for use on their travels in life, and conduct research for the final presentations at the "Stress Conference" at the end of the program. Teachers provide some program content, in the form of research-based handouts and links to online resources, and more than that they serve as a guide and positive role model, with unique insights on stress and stress management from personal experience.

By validating all students' inquiries and providing them with sources of information, facilitators encourage young people to become engaged and active thinkers.

Here are a few basic guidelines for effective facilitation:

- Remain neutral and acknowledge all contributions in an unbiased but questioning manner. By showing respect to all students regardless of their opinions, you encourage them to do the same.
- Insist on a supportive environment where students respond to ideas and not the individuals presenting those ideas. Make it clear from the start that everyone must be open to listening to and considering views that may be different from their own.
- Encourage all students to take part in discussions, but avoid forcing anyone to contribute if they are clearly reluctant. Ensure students know their feelings and opinions are important and will be respected.
- Keep discussions moving in a positive direction by questioning or posing hypothetical situations that encourage deeper thinking about the topic.
- Understand that a consensus is not necessary on issues, and that a lack of consensus is in fact a better reflection of "real life."
- Be comfortable with silence, as sometimes discussions require reflection.

Stress and school

School is an ideal place to deliver "stress lessons" since studies show school itself is the "top stressor" in teens' lives⁶. They stress about getting good grades, managing a heavy homework load, making their parents proud, fitting in, having a sense of belonging, being good enough to get into post-secondary programs, or land a decent job, after graduation—yet their stress about school can affect how they learn. Excessive stress can interfere with executive functions such as attention, memory and organization⁷. It can damage brain cells and shrink memory structures. Long-term excessive stress can cause digestive problems, stunt growth, and cause chronic health problems such as hypertension, heart disease and a weakened immune system⁸.

School-related stress can also affect relationships in the family, between teens and their parents, between parents themselves, between siblings. In other words, a student's negative experiences at school can be hard on the whole family. Teachers can make a huge difference in students' lives by making school a less stressful experience, and by helping teens develop resilience-building skills that they can use for life in post-secondary studies and the world of work.

NOTE: In preparation for using the activities in this guide, make sure to set guidelines around sharing of personal experiences. Teachers need to be prepared for disclosures that require follow up. A student may share something that is too sensitive for a classroom setting or should be shared with a supportive caring adult who is prepared to properly support and/or refer students. Encourage students to share examples they are comfortable announcing publicly. Despite trying to create a safe sharing environment, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Students should also be encouraged to seek appropriate supports if needed. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the supports and procedures in your school.

Stress and you

School can be stressful for teachers and other adults too. Let's face it: teaching is an enormous responsibility requiring a wide range of skills and the constant need to adapt and respond to challenges. But ultimately teachers are only human, with their own families and lives outside of the school environment. It's important for teachers to treat and take care of themselves well, and model healthy attitudes and coping behaviours that help them maintain a full and balanced life.

As key role models in students' lives, educators have a critical role to play in helping teach and demonstrate effective stress management. For many educators, the process begins with becoming more aware of the impact of their own stress in the classroom setting.

When teachers (and other adults in youths' lives) handle stress well, students notice. It shows them teachers like and respect themselves enough to take care of their needs while maintaining perspective—that they can continue to do their job well and enjoy life even when things get a little rough. It shows they are capable of pushing through life's daily problems and have goals and dreams beyond what may be happening around them at the moment. Please see the [Teacher reflection exercise handout](#) in the appendix, and other resources you find helpful, to explore your relationship with stress.

Using this resource

Teachers do not need to be experts on the subject of stress to use this resource. They don't even need to be particularly good at managing stress since the program invites teachers and students to work together to learn about stress, and the skills most helpful in coping and flourishing, from other people and sources. It's about providing the right environment—one that invites honesty and reflection—and offering a positive message, namely: it is important we stay balanced when the ups and downs of life threaten to drain us of energy and joy and prevent us from reaching our full potential.

Emotions are contagious – stress too!

A 2016 study¹¹ helped demonstrate the link between teachers' stress, burnout and students' stress.

To read the article 'Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students', [click here](#)^c.

" Teaching effective stress management involves tuning in to your own levels of stress. How you deal with your own stress is linked to how you help teens, how they experience stress, and how they learn to cope with their stress."

Dr. Robin Alter, Trustee,
Psychology Foundation
of Canada

" Students do not always think of their teachers as "regular people" having their own stress and struggles. Creating a dialogue between teacher and students allows for empathy and ultimately improves their personal connections, and that can have major academic dividends."

Guidance Counsellor in
New Brunswick, 2017

Teacher Resource

About the resource

Each lesson contains an overview, learning intentions, preparation tips, background notes (which teachers may want to draw from when facilitating discussions), and step-by-step activities, with handouts and links to videos, articles and other resources to stimulate learning.

Each lesson spans 60-90 minutes, depending on how deep or wide teachers wants to go on each activity, and how much in-class time teachers devote to working on individual research presentations to be delivered at the end of the program.

The [Appendix](#) contains ways to support teachers' efforts: a teacher reflection exercise (recommended before implementing Stress Lessons in the classroom), teacher tips, and a resource list for further information and ideas.



Lesson Plans

Lesson 1: The Upside and Downside of Stress

- Conversation Starter: Is stress good or bad for us?
- Pair-Share Activity: Exploring our stress response
- Group Activity: The upside and downside of stress
- Class Discussion: Too much stress for too long = trouble
- Introduction to "Stress Conference" research project
- Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

Lesson 2: The Science (and Art) of Stress

- Opening Activity: Stress brain!
- Pair Activity: Let's go inside
- Stress Conference: Planning and preparation
- Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

Lesson 3: My Coping Kit (everyday gear for managing stress)

- Opening Activity: Portable stress antidotes
- Class Activity: What's in your coping kit?
- Small Group and Class Activity: Solving problems and making decisions
- Class/Pair Activity: Expressions of self care
- Stress Conference: Check-in and preparation
- Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

Lesson 4: Taking Stress in Stride (having a forward-moving mindset)

- Opening Activity: Is this a good strategy for coping?
- Class/Pair Activity: Peers helping peers
- Pair/Small Group Activity: Think positive
- Stress Conference: Check-in and preparation
- Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

Lesson 5: Beyond Coping: Kicking butt (and other expressions of resilience)

- Opening Activity: Faces of resilience
- Pair or Small Group Activity: Case studies
- Stress Conference: Preparation
- Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

Lesson 6: Stress Conference

- Opening Activity: Welcome to our Stress Conference!
- Class Activity: Stress Conference Presentations
- Closing: Congratulations!

Lesson 1: The Upside and Downside of Stress

Overview:

Seeing that stress is part of everyone's life—and that stress can be positive and negative—can help students understand they are not alone in their struggles and they can have some control over their relationship with stress.

Learning intentions:

- Students will explore the universal nature of stress, its function and purpose
- Students will become familiar with the different kinds of stress, stressors and their impact
- Students will be introduced to the final project and begin to explore potential topics

Preparation:

- Review background information and activities, including video and article links

Make copies of:

- Stress Conference Ideas—1 per student
- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)
- Backgrounder on stress (optional)

You will need:

- Internet access and a way for students to view short videos
- Whiteboard and markers (or 3 large pieces of poster paper)
- Sticky notes (1 set per group, preferably a different colour for each group)

"Stress is when the world gets to you, and tries to tear you down. But a little bit of it is good, or else you wouldn't study for anything."

Grade 11 student
quoted in the
Globe and Mail,
09.29.2016

Background notes to help prepare for discussion:

In addressing the topic of stress, it's important to make sure we're using the right terms. While we often talk about stress as though it were an entity, a thing that's waiting around the corner to jump on us, stress is defined as "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances" ([Oxford Living Dictionary^D](#)).

The Stress Response is a biological and psychological response experienced on encountering a threat that we feel we do not have the resources to deal with: physical threats, such as being chased by a dog or being faced with a natural disaster; challenging emotional circumstances such as a conversation with a frustrating friend; dealing with a deadline at school or work; or, realizing that we have taken on too many tasks at once!

A certain amount of stress is useful and normal. It's our body giving us the boost of energy we need to compete in a sport, do our best on an exam, or deal with a difficult person or task. So we need a certain amount of stress to feel energized, alert, and engaged in life and its challenges.

Our brains and bodies were not designed to be in stress mode all the time. So, when our stress systems get overworked, we are at increased risk for various mental and physical health problems. For this reason it's helpful to know how to identify the symptoms of unhealthy, or chronic stress before they develop into a really big problem.

These symptoms include:

- feeling depressed, irritable, angry, anxious or overwhelmed
- difficulty concentrating
- fatigue
- tension in the back and shoulders
- lack of interest or motivation
- trouble sleeping

It's also useful to learn how to manage our emotions and challenge the ways we tend to think about stress. After all, stress can be invigorating (for more on that read "[The Surprising Benefits of Stress^E](#)" online at or lead us to care about the welfare of others, when channeled in the right way (see: "[How to Transform Stress into Courage and Connection^F](#)").

Stress isn't always avoidable—we all deal with stressors in our lives that are beyond our personal control. So it's necessary for all of us to learn strategies and skills that can help us to handle stress in the healthiest ways possible. That way we're not taken down by it but instead, propelled forward.

Educators, parents and other caring adults can help young people learn how to move past their problems by showing them how to develop resilience:

"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways."¹²

Dr. Michael Ungar, [Resiliency Research Centre^G](#), Dalhousie University

"Stress can be invigorating and can help us accomplish our best work as long as we have the knowledge and skills to manage it."

School counsellor,
Ontario, 2017

Activities for students

1. Conversation Starter: Is stress good or bad for us?

- Introduce the different sides of stress by showing a video of a man harnessing his stress to do something no one had ever done before: [walking tightrope over grand canyon - video](#)^H.
- Have a brief class discussion inviting students to share their reflections. These questions might help:
 - What are your thoughts on this video?
 - What or how did you feel watching it? Why?
 - What role did stress play in helping the tightrope walker across the canyon?

2. Pair-Share Activity: Exploring our stress response

- Divide students into pairs and invite them to share stories about a recent stressful experience. Encourage them to explain how they knew they were stressed and express how they felt (in mind and body) in the moment. Ask them to also include what they did to cope with the stressor.
- After giving students a few moments to share their stories, if appropriate, ask students to say a few words about their partner's experience with stress and a few details about the person's stress response and coping method. (This part of the activity tests students' ability to be respectful and caring listeners, a skill they can develop and will learn more about later in the program.)

3. Group Activity: The upside and downside of stress

- Write 'Upside' and 'Downside' on the board (or on two large pieces of poster paper).
- Divide class into 4 or 5 groups. Give each group a set of sticky notes (preferably a different colour per group.) Designate a writer for each group.
- Ask students to brainstorm ideas/examples of a good experience of stress (in their own lives or beyond), and write one example per sticky note.
- After a few minutes, ask a member of each group to stick their group's ideas on the board.
- Debrief with the class, drawing attention to common themes that were raised in each group.
- Follow the same procedure for a bad experience of stress.
- Follow up with a brief class discussion. Ask: What does it mean? What can we make from these various experiences of stress?

Number crunching?

A math, business or social studies class could analyze or map the results of this exercise and use them for a project or the basis of a problem to be solved.

4. Class Discussion: Too much stress, for too long = trouble

- Show one or both of the videos below that demonstrate stress can feel bad and hurt us if we have too much for too long and worry about it.

Stress is Like a Glass of Water¹

A short video that speaks to how stress can become heavy and negative if we hold on to it for too long.

How to Make Stress Your Friend¹

A Ted Talk that helps make the point that how we think about stress affects how it impacts our health and lives. We can learn how to harness and use stress to our advantage—it's all in how we look at it and what we do to manage it.

- Facilitate a class discussion:
 - What are the key messages in this video(s)?
 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the messages? Why?
 - How do the points in these videos relate to ordinary experiences of stress?
 - What does the video(s) make you want to know or learn more about?

5. Introduction to “Stress Conference” research project

- Inform students that they will have a chance to explore stress and focus on developing personalized coping strategies as they prepare for an upcoming “Stress Conference.”
- Discuss as a class and make some decisions in terms of the scope and style of the project, important dates, etc. Get creative! Have students present their research in the style of a sharing circle, a TED Talk, a Q and A “press conference,” a Nobel Prize research conference, or another fun way.
- Explain to students that they will be learning more about stress and resilience (the skills needed to not only overcome adversity but thrive on the other side of it) in upcoming lessons, and that they will also be given some class time to plan and work on a stress management-related research project and presentation.
- Encourage students to choose a stress-related research topic that interests them. If desired, give them a [Stress Conference Ideas handout](#), featuring examples to spark their thinking and imagination.
- Ask students to choose a research topic by the next lesson so they can get started on mapping out their research strategy and presentation plan for the class’s “Stress Conference.”

6. Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

- Give students a few minutes to write about three or more things they learned about stress, and reflect on what it means to them. Or you could instruct them to do so for homework. If desired, provide each student with a [Reflection Exercise handout](#).
- You might even want to encourage students/learners to keep a stress journal at home for the duration of the program, something they can reflect back on and notice their own development.

Did you know?

Alfred Nobel (1833–1896) was a Swedish chemist, engineer, inventor, businessman, and philanthropist. Known for inventing dynamite, Nobel held hundreds of patents and was a major manufacturer of cannons and other armaments. In 1888, when his brother Ludvig died, the press mistakenly reported that Alfred had passed away instead. One newspaper’s headline read: The merchant of death is dead. Some people believe Alfred’s premature obituary stressed him out, prompting him to bequeath his will for what became known as the Nobel Prizes.

What do you wonder about?

- What do Canadian high school students stress about most? Why?
- How does stress impact the brain and body of males versus females?
- Does social media cause stress or relieve stress? Why?
- How do different cultures think about and address stress? Why?
- How can we reduce some of what stresses us out?
- What are the healthiest ways to prevent and manage stress? What's the evidence?
- How can we turn negative experience of stress into something more positive?
- How is the food we eat related to stress and stress management?
- Who is a good example of resilience (someone who pushed through adversity and stress and became a better version of themselves). What did they do to survive, thrive and not give up?
- Other?

I wonder about _____

What can you do to find out about it?

- Online research and tools (facts, statistics, case studies, tools such as stresstrategies.ca)
- Talk to people (surveys, focus groups, interviews)
- Watch and listen (TED Talks, music videos)
- Look around (art, architecture, literature, poetry)
- Explore products and services (stress is big business)
- Identify mentors and role models (who is good at stress?)
- Other?

I'm going to start by _____

Today I learned these three things:

These things mean something to me because:

Lesson 2: The Science (and Art) of Stress

Overview:

Looking at what's going on inside the brain and body can help students understand the various processes at play when we experience stress. Being able to recognize a stressor - whether short-term or long-term, ordinary or toxic, real or imaginary—can help us make better decisions about how to handle it.

Learning intentions:

- Students will explore the physiological impact of the stress response
- Students will develop an awareness of their own stressors
- Students will begin to plan their project for the Stress Conference

Preparation:

- Review background information and activities, including video and article links

Make copies of:

- Stress Conference Planning Guide—1 per student
- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)

You will need:

- Internet access and a way for students to view short videos and an article online

Background notes to help prepare for discussion:

We all know stress affects different parts of our body and that it can't be dismissed as "all in your head." But the fact is that the human stress response does start there. In essence, it's our brain that flicks on the switch to our body's "inner pharmacy." It sends around messages and gets different parts of the body to produce and disseminate chemicals that serve to either activate or relax us. In other words, some chemicals stimulate us to get going when the need arises, while others calm and soothe us so we can relax and reflect.

Scientifically speaking, what's happening is this: when we sense a threat, information is sent to a part of our brain that processes emotions—the amygdala. The amygdala interprets what we see and hear. If it senses danger, it calls out to the hypothalamus, which sends signals to the rest of the body through the autonomic nervous system (responsible for breathing, blood pressure, and other involuntary body functions).

There are two parts to the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic nervous system triggers our activation impulse (fight, flight, or freeze), flooding the body with instant energy to respond to a threat, while the parasympathetic nervous system serves to calm the body down after the threat has passed. (Note: While freezing might not seem like an active

response, it can in fact be an intentional and effortful response, such as when a person stiffens and stays still when a bee is close by, or when a soldier shuts down to cope with the shock and stress of combat.)

In the face of a threat, the hormone adrenaline (also known as epinephrine) is pumped into the bloodstream and circulates throughout the body, bringing on physiological changes:

- Our heart beat, pulse rate and blood pressure increase, speeding up our breathing
- Our lungs open wider, increasing the amount of oxygen to our brain and thereby increasing our alertness
- Our senses are heightened
- Blood sugar and stored fats flood our bloodstream, giving us extra energy

But this all happens quickly, and often starts before we are even fully aware that a threat is real.

The second stage of the stress response system is activated by the hypothalamus. Known as the **HPA axis** (hypothalamus, the pituitary gland, and the adrenal glands), this series of hormonal signals keeps the body in high-alert mode and results in the release of cortisol if the threat continues. Cortisol keeps us alert until the threat passes.

Note: When we are in this fight-flight-freeze response, we do not hear words or explanations. This is because the neural pathway, from the prefrontal cortex (the problem-solving area of the brain) back to the amygdala, is much like a dirt road—it's underdeveloped, and messages in words are not heard or understood. When we're calm, there's an upshift in oxygenated glucose blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, allowing us to think more clearly.

For a more detailed scientific explanation of the brain on stress, check out [Understanding the stress response^k](#).

The mind and body are designed to be calm and balanced most of the time. Frequent reoccurring adrenaline spikes can cause damage to our circulatory system, increasing our risk of heart attack and stroke. Chronic stress, even at low levels, can cause various physical and mental health problems, making life uncomfortable at best, and unbearable at worst.

Stress and the Teen Brain

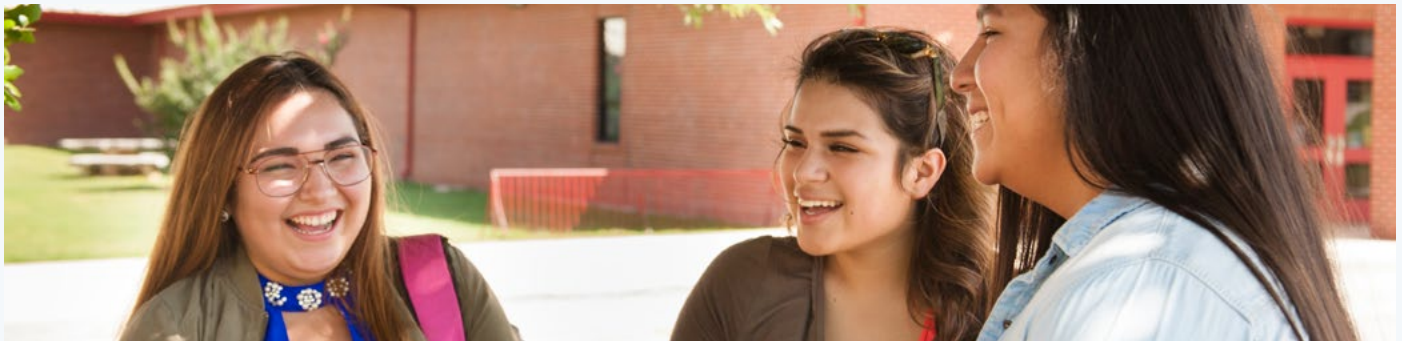
During the teen years, the brain goes through dramatic changes; it remains under construction during adolescence and won't develop completely until a person's early 20s. Some of these changes can make the teen brain more vulnerable to the short and long-term impacts of stress¹³. Encourage students to get to know more about what's going in their brain!



Talking Circles

Consider using “Talking Circles” as an approach to class discussions for activities in this guide. The following is an excerpt from *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners*, 2005, p. 163. Alberta Education.

“Talking Circles are a foundational approach to First Nations pedagogy-in-action, and provide a model for an educational activity that encourages dialogue, respect, the co-creation of learning content, and social discourse. Using this approach to talking with others provides a sense of communion and interconnectedness in the classroom. When everyone has their turn to speak, when all voices are heard in a respectful and attentive way, the learning atmosphere becomes a rich source of information, identity, and interaction. Talking Circles originated with First Nations leaders - the process was used to ensure that all leaders in the tribal council were heard, and that those who were speaking were not interrupted. Usually the Chief would initiate the conversation, with other members responding and sharing their perceptions and opinions of the topic under discussion. The process provides an excellent model for interaction within the learning environment as well. It is also very adaptive to any circle of people who need to discuss topics and make decisions together.



Talking circles are based on the sacred tradition of sharing circles. People leading a traditional sharing circle will have a blessing from an Elder to do this, and will use special prayers and sacred objects in the ceremony. The purpose of the less formal talking circle, used as part of classroom instruction, is to create a safe environment in which students can share their point of view with others. In a Talking Circle, each one is equal and each one belongs. Participants in a Talking Circle learn to listen and respect the views of others. The intention is to open hearts to understand and connect with one another. Talking circles may be adapted for use with any topic area.

- Participants sit in a circle. The circle symbolizes completeness.
- Review ground rules with participants. For example:
 - Everyone’s contribution is equally important.
 - State what you feel or believe starting with ‘I-statements,’ e.g., ‘I feel ...’
- All comments are addressed directly to the question or the issue, not to comments another person has made. Both negative and positive comments about what anyone else has to say should be avoided.
- An everyday object such as a rock or pencil is sometimes used as a talking object.
- When the talking object is placed in someone’s hands; it is that person’s turn to share his or her thoughts, without interruption. The object is then passed to the next person in a clockwise direction.
- Whoever is holding the object has the right to speak and others have the responsibility to listen.
- Everyone else is listening in a non-judgemental way to what the speaker is saying.
- Silence is an acceptable response. There must be no negative reactions to the phrase, “I pass.”

Speakers should feel free to express themselves in any way that is comfortable; by sharing a story, a personal experience, by using examples or metaphors, and so on.

For more information go to the [First Nations Pedagogy](#)¹ online webpage.

Activities for students

1. Opening Activity: Stress brain!

- Play this video of [people paid to jump off a 10 metre tower into a pool](#)^M.
- Have a brief class discussion. Ask:
 - What were you thinking when you were watching this video?
 - What were the different ways people handled the challenge?
 - How would you have handled jumping off a 10-metre tower?
 - Based on observing the people in the video, what are the effects of stress on the brain and body?
 - What stresses you out? When you're stressed out, what do you feel physically, mentally and emotionally?

Note: If students have trouble with this question, ask them to imagine a stressful situation (e.g., you received bad news, someone provokes or acts aggressively toward you). Then have them imagine the "moment of choice," when a person decides how to respond and act on it. Remind students that being aware of how stress "feels" to them can help them make better decisions about how to handle it.

2. Pair Activity: Let's go inside

Have students read this [scientific article](#)^N, which describes the stress response using a metaphor (i.e., using a "gas pedal" and "brake" analogy to help us picture our bodies revving up and slowing down). You could also or instead have students watch and take notes on this video on [how stress affects the body](#)^O.

- Divide students into pairs and invite them to imagine their own unique or artful way to describe or demonstrate the science behind the stress response.
- If desired, have student pairs share their metaphors or ideas with the class.

3. Stress Conference: Planning and preparation

- Remind students about the upcoming "Stress Conference" they will be participating in with results from their research projects.
- Provide each student with a Stress Conference Planning Guide handout. Give them time to articulate the research question(s) they wish to address and to begin to map out their research strategy and potential presentation plan.

4. Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

- Give students a few minutes to write down three or more things they learned today, and what it means to them personally.

Artistic ways to introduce the science of stress:

A teacher could introduce the topic of stress on the brain using music, art or literature. For example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*¹⁴, a love story set in a fear-filled totalitarian state, is full of vivid depictions and ruminations of stressful situations. Consider the potential for rich conversation with this passage:

"It struck him that in moments of crisis one is never fighting against an external enemy but always against one's own body. Even now, in spite of the gin, the dull ache in his belly made consecutive thought impossible. And it is the same, he perceived, in all seemingly heroic or tragic situations. On the battlefield, in the torture chamber, on a sinking ship, the issues that you are fighting for are always forgotten, because the body swells up until it fills the universe, and even when you are not paralyzed by fright or screaming with pain, a moment-to-moment struggle against hunger or cold or sleeplessness, against a sour stomach or an aching tooth."

(Part 1, Chapter 8, P. 102-3)

Extend the learning (optional)

Invite students to consider an adult(s) in their lives and how they cope with stress. Ask them to both identify and assess the adult's coping style (i.e., how do they cope, what do you think of the way they cope, and why). Then, if possible, have students have a conversation with the adult about how and why they choose to cope that particular way and compare their findings with their original impressions. Ask students to record and share what they learned from the exercise.

What I know from my teacher about the "Stress Conference" (what, where, when):

What I'm most interested in researching and learning more about:

What I imagine my presentation will look and feel like (PowerPoint, interactive, scientific, artistic, etc.):

What I need to do first to get going on my project:

What else I need to do (in order of priority):

Lesson 3: My Coping Kit

(everyday gear for managing stress)

Overview:

Problem-solving skills and self-care strategies are tools or “gear” students can carry with them and use when times get tough on their journey through life.

Learning intentions:

- Students will explore a range of positive coping strategies and ways of using them effectively to respond to different kinds of stressors in their own lives
- Students will have an opportunity to share ideas about the importance of self-care in coping effectively with stress

Preparation

- Review background information and activities

Make copies of

- My Coping Kit—1 per student
- “Stress – What can you do about it?” infographic - 1 per student (pg. 44)
- 3-Step Problem Solving—1 per student
- Use Your Imagination—1 per student
- Stress First Aid—1 per student
- Tips for Tackling Stress—1 per student
- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)

You will need:

- Internet access and a way for students to watch/listen to breathing technique video
- A backpack or bag filled with things representing what you think about, use or do to cope with stress in your own life (e.g., inspiring quotes, healthy food, music, self-help book, exercise gear, journal, map, etc.)

Note: Have fun filling your bag. And make sure that it contains one or two things that speak to how you handle problem-solving and decision-making. For example, a book or movie that inspires you because of the way the author or character handled him or herself.

Stressed Out! How much stress is too much?

Stress becomes a problem when we experience too much of it for too long or when we can't recover from stress. Our bodies and brains were not designed to be in stress mode all the time. When our stress systems get overworked, we are at increased risk for various health and mental health problems.

But even before the more serious stress-related problems start, people usually experience certain symptoms:

- feeling depressed, irritable, angry, anxious or overwhelmed
- fatigue
- lack of interest or motivation
- difficulty concentrating
- tension in the back and shoulders
- trouble sleeping

If your students (or maybe even you) are experiencing some of the above symptoms, it may be a sign that stress is becoming a problem. A problem-solving approach that can help you make an action plan to manage their stress might be helpful and the [Infographic handout](#) (pg. 44) can help serve as a tool for reflection and dialogue, helping people consider stress strategies that can work for them.

Background notes to help prepare for discussion:

Some people naturally gauge and manage their stress. They might simply reflect on something that's stressing them out and intuitively ask themselves:

- Is this a small problem that I'm hoping will go away on its own?
- Am I finding myself coping with its effects on my mind and body?
- Is it to the point where it's impacting my work, relationships, other people's lives, and I can't take it anymore?!

Then, if necessary—and if they have the ability to do so—they can make a plan to address what's stressing them out.

Others may need more help sometimes to figure out what the problem is and what to do about it, if indeed "doing something" is even possible. They might benefit from more formal and logical problem-solving techniques, such as a series of steps to help them zero in on exactly what the problem is, identify possible solutions, and then evaluate the solutions.

When we can't change a stressor and must cope, we need to reduce its impact. An effective way to reduce stress is positive self-talk. Repeatedly telling ourselves that we're strong or brave (or amazing in some other way), especially in the face of a stressor we can't change, can help us stay confident and calm. Saying to ourselves, "I've got this!" or "I can handle this" or "This is temporary" can help us keep going by subtly setting our sights on what's possible after the stressor goes away and we're in charge of our environment again.

It's also important that we increase our self-care to compensate and restore balance. But this isn't always self-evident – and often is easier to say than do in a world where we all feel rushed to keep up (or reply to that text!). Getting enough sleep, eating well, being physically active, making time for activities that we enjoy, and avoiding the overuse of alcohol or other drugs are ways to care for ourselves that will improve our ability to better tolerate stress and recover more effectively from stress. It also helps to change our narrative about how stress affects us. For more information about how to think about stress in healthier ways, check out this article in the New York Times on [how to get better at stress](#)⁹.



Activities for students

1. Opening Activity: Portable stress antidotes

- Introduce the idea of building a “coping kit,” filled with “portable stress antidotes,” by playing this video by the [National Institutes of Health](#)^Q.
- Lead students through four rounds of breathing, as instructed in the video, and follow up with a brief discussion, inquiring about:
 - how students felt about conscious breathing,
 - how they felt before and after using the technique,
 - whether or not they’d consider using this portable stress antidote in future, and if so in what circumstances.

2. Class Activity: What’s in your coping kit?

- Bring out your backpack and unpack it in front of the class, briefly discuss what the portable items mean to you and how they help you.
- Invite students to consider what they might put in their own “coping kit.” Facilitate a discussion with students about ways to cope with stress. As a conversation starter, or to help the students reflect on their own strategies, consider giving each student a [My Coping Kit handout](#) and allow them time to write or draw pictures of specific things they think about or do to feel better when they get stressed (e.g., do poorly on an exam) or when coping with a stressful situation (e.g., an unhealthy relationship).

Note: You might want to tell students that if they don’t have many things to write or draw yet, there will be many ideas they can add to their “coping kit” by the end of the lesson.

3. Small Group and Class Activity: Solving problems and making decisions

People have different thinking styles and ways of making important or stressful decisions. Some people like to work through things logically. Other people prefer an artistic approach. Some flip a coin. Some do all three. There’s no one right answer for everyone. But it can be helpful to think about how you solve problems and learn how others approach and overcome theirs.

- Ask students to think back to a recent time when they were stressed (e.g., late for class, lost an expensive textbook). Ask them to think about how they felt, physically, mentally and emotionally.
- Break class into small groups and have them share their examples, or other examples, of a time when they faced a problem and had to make decisions to get through it
- If desired, share a personal story of resilience of your own to demonstrate, or talk about one of your favourite characters from a book or film who overcame obstacles and demonstrated resilience

Note: If students would rather not share examples from their own experiences, or if they believe they’ve never solved a problem or demonstrated resilience, invite them to think of someone else’s story of overcoming a problem. Make connections to books students may have studied or films they may have seen.

Youth from the [McCreary Centre Society](#)^R shared the idea of using ‘stress memes’ as a way to help spark conversation (e.g., pick one you can relate to and share why you picked it with the group and/or a small group.)

- Which meme did you pick?
- What is it about that meme that made you pick it?
- What’s the relevance to stress and/or dealing with it?



**DON'T STRESS
YOURSELF OUT WITH
THINGS YOU CAN'T
CONTROL OR CHANGE.**

Note: Some students might want to talk about the role of alcohol or other drugs in coping or self-care. Here's a resource that might be helpful to bring in to your conversations, since while it may seem like having a drink or using other substances is helpful, it's not a healthy coping strategy for the long haul: [You and Substance Use: Stuff to think about and ways to make changes](#)⁵.

Ask them to reflect on these questions:

- How did the problem arise?
 - How did you think about the problem?
 - What did you decide to do? Why?
 - What and/or who helped you?
 - What did you do to cope with stress?
 - What happened at the end?
 - How do you feel about it now?
 - What did you learn from it?
- Bring students back together and debrief about some of the things that were important in the decisions students made, and what worked better than others.
 - If desired, add more to the discussion by giving each student a copy of the [3-Step Problem Solving handout](#). Walk through the contents and invite feedback from students.

4. Class-Pair Activity: Expressions of self-care

- Write "self-care" on the board and explore with the class what the term means and why it's so important, especially as a buffer against oppressive forms of stress.
- Get students to help you create a list of self-care "no brainers"—things we all know are good for us such as healthy eating and physical activity—as well as a list of more subtle ways we can ensure we stay strong and positive enough to withstand life's challenges (such as thinking and saying kind things to ourselves about ourselves, taking time to do things we really enjoy to balance out the things we don't enjoy, and so on).
- [Demonstrate an example of a self-care technique](#)^T, involving muscle tension and relaxation that can help students develop an awareness of the bodily sensations of the stress response and relaxation. Or show a video that walks viewers through a tension and relaxation exercise, such as this [six-minute seated relaxation activity](#)^U.
- Invite students to work in pairs (or as individuals or small groups) to express their ideas about self-care in a symbolic or artistic way (e.g. diagram, picture, motto). Ask students to represent the idea that taking care of yourself isn't simply one aspect of many in your life but instead fundamental to dealing effectively with all other parts of your life.
- Close the activity by giving students more "gear" they can add to their personal "coping kits": [Stress First Aid handout](#) and [Tips for Tackling Stress handout](#).

5. Stress Conference: Check-in and preparation

Check in with students about their progress in preparing for the upcoming "Stress Conference." Encourage them to include practical elements to their presentations that are truly meaningful to them and are therefore most useful to share with their classmates. One way to do this is by giving each student a copy of Stress First Aid and Tips for Tackling Stress handout and asking them to consider which strategies resonate most with their personal experiences. They could do this by ranking the strategies on each handout in order of meaningfulness, number one being the technique or tip they are "already doing because it really works" or are "most likely to try." If possible, give them time to work on their projects and talk to you about ways they can incorporate (or even focus on) any of the strategies or tips they learned in today's lesson into their projects.

6. Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

- Give students a few minutes to write down three or more things they learned today, and what it means to them personally. If desired, give students a [Reflection Exercise handout](#).

Fill the page with words or pictures representing what you currently think about or do to get through a stressful moment or to cope with longer-term stress.

1. Articulate

What's your problem? How does it cause you stress?

Do you have control of/over this problem? (Are there things you can do in the short-term, mid-term and long-term to address it?) If not, what can you do to cope?

If you have some control of/over your problem, what do you think you need to change or do to solve it? Express it in the form of a goal:

2. Identify

What are some things you could do to achieve your goal?

Do you need help to reach your goal? If so, what kind of help (e.g., talk to a parent, friend, trusted adult such as a guidance counsellor, coach, mental health professional)? Who can you talk to first?

Reflecting on all your answers above, which action item can you start with?

Is there anything that will make it hard for you to follow through with this action? If so, what can you do to get through the obstacle?

3. Evaluate

After you follow through on your action, ask yourself:

Did the actions I took help to solve the problem or change the problem for the better?

Were there negative outcomes? Do you need to change your strategy?

Just Breathe

It sounds obvious but breathing is really good for us, especially when we are in the throes of a stressful experience. Slow, deep breathing in particular lowers our heart rate and blood pressure and helps us feel calmer and more focused. (Exhaling slowly is key.) Relaxation breathing techniques are easy to learn and can be done almost anywhere or anytime you're feeling stressed. There are a number of great free apps available (like Breathe, Headspace and Calm) that make relaxation breathing really easy.

Think forward

Sometimes when we're stressed, it can help to remind ourselves that it won't always be this way, that the stressful situation will come to an end eventually. We can do this by imagining a future scene when things look and feel different, or by making a motto and repeating it to ourselves until we get through the stressful situation. For example, we might say "I got this" or other light-hearted mantras before a school presentation or while babysitting. It works for bigger problems too. Be truthful and realistic, and say things that are positive, like: "I'm going to do really well this year in school, I can improve my math mark."



Use humour

Laughter releases tension, gets our minds off our troubles, and causes physiological changes in the body that are similar to the changes we experience when we exercise. Watch stand-up comedy or a funny movie. Or, better yet, hang out with funny friends for a while.

Reach out

Humans are hard-wired to give and get social support. Social support can have a physiological impact that makes us feel better right away. Share stuff about your life with close friends who know how to listen in a caring and non-judgemental way. (And be a good listener for them too.) Or find someone else you can connect with—a trusted family member or other adult, a mentor or counsellor. Connecting is good for you.

Play music

Listening to music can have a powerful effect on our minds and bodies, releasing us from what's bothering us and letting us explore other thoughts and feelings. Singing aloud—and dancing around!—releases feel-good chemicals in our bodies that give us a break from the heaviness of our problems and recharge our batteries so we can better enjoy what's going right in our lives.



Break away

We're not machines and sometimes need to distract ourselves from our stress. Play a game, talk to a friend, take a walk—do something to give your mind a rest. Catch and stop yourself when you start "stressing about your stress." It doesn't help.

Move it

Feeling stressed? Get up and move! Research has demonstrated what we all instinctively know—regular physical activity is essential for good mental and physical health. It releases feel-good chemicals like serotonin, in the brain and body. Take opportunities to move your body whenever possible. Curious if you're getting enough? [Click here!](#)^v

If you can't change the stressor, change your narrative

It's tough to do but sometimes we have to accept and adapt to stress we can't change (e.g., parents getting divorced, final exams, dentist appointments). Accept what you can't control and let it go – make peace with it. It helps to find ways to “turn off” negative or catastrophic thinking because these only make stress feel heavier. It also helps to put a positive spin on things. For example, you can keep a journal to record the ways you're dealing with your situation, and later use it to help others get through similar circumstances. You can sometimes find humour in your situation and have a good laugh (a lot of comedy performances are born this way.) Or you can simply appreciate the lessons you're learning from your situation and dream of ways you're going to use this education to your advantage in the future.



Calm the body before the mind

Do whatever you have to keep cool. Listen to music, read, exercise, deep breathing, meditation, praying, getting outside, all of the above—whatever you can do to feel calm inside is helpful. (Some ways of calming down are better for you than others. A lot of people use alcohol and other drugs to relax but there is often a cost to the brain and body, especially for teens whose brains are still developing. Keep in mind that tobacco and alcohol in particular figure prominently in hospital statistics related to sickness, injury and death. So-called “legal drugs” doesn't mean “good-for-you drugs.”)

“You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” - Jon Kabat-Zinn

Take care of yourself

Cover the basics for sure—get enough sleep, eat nutritious food (most of the time), enjoy physical activity, making time for stuff you really enjoy doing. All of these things make you feel good, and if you feel good you are better at handling stuff you don't enjoy. Note: Your body repairs and recharges itself while you're sleeping. Teens in particular need a lot of sleep owing to the revolution-like changes taking place inside their brains and bodies. A lot of energy is required to manage a developing brain and body.



Get more “green time”

Nature offers one of the most reliable boosts to your mental and physical well-being. Hang out in the park with a friend and walk in the woods whenever you can. We are part of nature and need to go “home” sometimes to stay real and balanced.

Have a “can do” attitude

Believing in yourself—telling yourself you can do something, even if it's a little intimidating or difficult—can help you take steps that ultimately boost your confidence and free you from negative and sometimes paralyzing self-talk. Going into a task—at school, work, or on the sports field—with a positive attitude makes you perform better. Even if you don't succeed at something, you can high-five yourself for giving the job your full attention and effort (which can also boost your sense of self-worth).

Think of handling stress as “riding the wave”

It's important to remember that stressful situations are temporary, especially when it feels like we've been hit by a tidal wave of stress and are getting knocked overboard because of it. Choosing to ride the wave, instead of fighting or caving in to it, reminds us that “this too shall pass” and things will go back to normal in time. Riding the wave gives us a different vantage point from which to view and assess our problems, and gives us time to consider what we can do to prevent or avoid that same kind of stress, if possible, in future.

Lesson 4: Taking Stress in Stride

(having a forward-moving mindset)

Overview:

Peer support and a positive attitude can help students keep going forward, especially when their stress cannot be avoided or will take time to reduce.

Learning intentions:

- Students will begin to differentiate positive coping strategies from ineffective or counterproductive responses to stress
- Students will explore the important role of thinking styles and seeking help in developing effective coping strategies

Preparation:

- Review background information and activities, including video and resource links

Make copies of:

- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)

You will need:

- Internet access and a way for students to watch/listen to music videos, explore peer listening resource, and participate in online survey

Background notes to help prepare for discussion:

We all understand that stress is part of life. But we don't always realize that our survival and success depend on how well we are able to manage and harness our stress.

Sometimes we are able to tolerate a stressful situation when it's happening, and recover quickly from it when it passes. In other words, we get through the situation as best we can, and then forget about it when it's over. But other times the stressor is a little stronger, lasts longer or hits us when we already feel stressed or run down. That's when we need to think more about how to cope.

Evidence suggests teens focus most on managing emotions and reducing tension when coping with stress. They do this by support seeking, problem solving, and distraction¹⁵.

Support seeking includes seeking information, emotional support, and instrumental help (finding ways to solve the problem causing them stress). Adolescents' patterns of support seeking differ from those of both children and adults. Compared to children, adolescents are more likely to go to peers for emotional support and help with daily hassles. At the same time, they are less likely to seek support from adults¹⁷.

"Adolescents increasingly turn to peers for support, but peers are also just developing the skills to provide good advice and help."¹⁶

Zimmer-Gembeck

"All humans have a tendency to ruminate more on bad experiences than positive ones. It's an evolutionary adaptation that helps us avoid danger and adapt quickly and react quickly in crisis. But constant negativity can also get in the way of happiness, add to our stress and worry level and ultimately damage our health."

Alderman, L.
Globe and Mail,
01.13.2017

Teens coping strategies are dependent on the type of stressor. When in situations that are appraised as uncontrollable or in which adults are known to have authority, adolescents typically seek support from adults, especially as they get older.

Young or old, good coping requires positive thinking. When stress starts building up, the way we think can either help or hinder us. Sometimes our negative thinking patterns make an already stressful situation seem worse than it really is, and actually add to our stress levels. On the other hand, changing the way we think about a stressor can make it easier to cope.

"Sometimes overcoming a challenge is as simple as changing the way you think about it."

Changing the way we think about a stressor involves learning:

- to accept and adapt to stress we can't change
- to recognize and "turn off" negative or catastrophic thinking that makes an already stressful situation feel even more stressful
- to think in ways that are helpful when we are stressed

Common coping techniques

- listening to music
- talking to friends
- physical activity
- reading
- meditation
- praying, going to your place of worship
- yoga
- getting a massage

American Psychological Association's 2014 Stress in America survey.¹⁹

Note: Some coping strategies are better than others. Many people use screen time – watching TV or movies and surfing the net – to distract themselves from stress. But in the Stress in America survey¹⁸, relatively few people said screen time was truly effective as a stress management strategy. Some coping strategies give people temporary relief, but can cause other problems. For example, people may feel relief from stress after eating junk food or having a few drinks. But both can cause health problems if they become habits and they can increase negative self-talk, self-criticism. Almost everybody does things like that sometimes. But it's a good idea to learn about other coping strategies that may be more helpful.

Activities for students

1. Opening Activity: Is this a good strategy for coping?

- Have students watch/listen to [Stressed Out](#)^W, the break-out song of the 2016 Grammy-winning duo Twenty-One Pilots.
- Write the following questions on the board and have students discuss them, in pairs or small groups:
 - What are they stressed out about?
 - How are they coping with that stress?
 - Are they using healthy coping strategies? Why or why not?
 - How do you cope with stress? Why?
- Debrief with class. Ask students to share some of their coping methods. Write the mostly commonly expressed and effective ones (e.g., spending time with friends) on the board

Extend the Learning: Optional activity

Some teachers might want to invite students to explore more about Twenty-One Pilots, who until recently were largely unknown except to a small group of fans who resonated with the hope and “hang in there” message in many of the duo’s songs. Or you could have them explore the lives of Canadian artists, such as K’naan or The Weeknd, or other musicians of your students’ choosing who have experienced surviving and thriving in both music and life.

2. Pair-Class Activity: Peers helping peers

Hanging out and talking with close friends is how most teens cope with the stress in their lives. Adolescents tend to seek support from their peers rather than adults. Knowing there are caring people out there, who listen without judgement, can be enough to lift a person, young or old, and help them cope with serious problems when they are alone. Listening in particular is a powerful gift to give to another person. But the truth is most people aren’t very good at listening. Almost all of us could be better at listening. This exercise aims at helping teens be better listeners for one another.

- Watch this short video on [being a good listener](#)^X. If desired, explore “[The Gift of Listening: A guide for mentoring peers](#)^Y”
- Walk through the guide with the class, paying specific attention to the listening skills section starting on page 6.
- Ask the students, in pairs, to practice the listening exercises in the skills section of the handbook.
- Debrief with class about key aspects of listening and how it can help relieve stress in others.
- Briefly touch on other types of social support, and brainstorm a list of other people (within and outside of the school community) students could talk to if a problem were too serious or overwhelming and would be better handled with adult help.

3. Pair or Small Group Activity: Think positive

Positive thinking helps people push through adversity and keep looking to the future, despite setbacks or failures. It's easier to have a positive attitude if you know positive things about yourself and know you can rely on your strengths to help you manage stressful situations.

- Invite students to explore this resource about [reframing our thoughts](#)².
- Break class into pairs or small groups and have them share and compare results.

Positive perspectives are infectious!

You might want to invite students to search out examples of people with helpful attitudes and inspiring stories featuring positive coping methods. Below are examples of interesting or unique ways people over time have expressed ideas around coping with life stress and overcoming adversity.

- A 13th Century poem: [The Guest House](#)^{AA} by professor and poet Jallaludin Rumi
- A life-and-death survival story: [Man's Search for Meaning](#)^{BB} by psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl
- A message of resilience and hope for teens: [The Hollow Tree: Fighting Addiction with Traditional Native Healing](#)^{CC} by professor and author Herb Nabigon
- A TED Ed Talk: [5 1/2 Mentors who will change your life](#)^{DD} by Doug Stewart

4. Stress Conference Check-In and preparation

- Check in with students about their progress in preparing for the upcoming "Stress Conference." If possible, give them time to work on their projects and talk to you about any challenges they're having.

5. Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

- Give students a few minutes to write down three or more things they learned today, and what it means to them personally. If desired, give students a [Reflection Exercise handout](#).

Extend the Learning: Using character strengths

- Invite each student to participate in a 10-minute [online survey](#)^{EE} aimed at identifying their character strengths. Explore more about it here: [Character Strengths in Positive Education](#)^{FF}.
- As homework, ask students to reflect on how their character strengths can help them become better at managing stress, and to share their ideas with other students during the next class.

Lesson 5 - Beyond Coping: Kicking butt

(and other expressions of resilience)

Overview:

Young people can benefit from knowing that there are people in the world who have fought for themselves and/or the rights of others, have overcome great obstacles using their own strengths and the support of others, and have emerged as leaders or mentors to others.

Learning intentions:

- Students will explore the role that stress and adversity can play in the development of resiliency and growth

Preparation

- Review background information and activities

Make copies of

- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)

You will need:

- Internet access and a way for students to watch/listen to video clips (optional)
- Photographs or images of people who have demonstrated resilience (e.g., Muhammad Ali)

Background notes to help prepare for discussion:

Handling our stress in healthy ways helps us feel good. But what can really make us feel good is learning something from our experiences and doing something with our new knowledge and skills. Handling and harnessing stress is key to resilience. But what does resilience look and feel like?

Quitting smoking is a great way to visualize resilience. Usually people start thinking about quitting smoking when a problem develops. They're having trouble breathing, or they're spending too much money on cigarettes, or their loved ones are getting on their case about smelling bad or risking their health. So they try different strategies and techniques for quitting and coping with withdrawal. Some people make a decision to quit and do just that by never buying cigarettes again and avoiding being around people and places that allow smoking. Others need nicotine patches, peer support and host of other strategies and tools to stay motivated, and even then they may fail repeatedly before they finally quit. But everyone who quits smoking seems to have the same experience on the other side. More than having pushed through a problem, they feel better—sometimes a lot better!—on the other side of the problem and choose to do things that demonstrate just how far from the smoking lifestyle they've come. They start jogging and are soon training for a marathon. They harness what they learned from their experience and help other people quit smoking. That's resilience—overcoming adversity and being better on the other side.

There are many great examples of resilient people in the world. Muhammad Ali is one of “the greatest.” Born Cassius Clay Jr., Muhammad Ali bounced back from a disadvantaged position to become a prize fighter in many senses of the term:

“In October of 1954, when Clay was 12, he and a friend rode their bicycles to a Louisville bazaar and spent the day eating free popcorn and candy. When it was time to head home, Clay discovered that his red-and-white Schwinn had been stolen. A white police officer named Joe Martin was downstairs, in a boxing gym, and a crying Clay reported the theft to him. Clay swore that we would beat up whoever took it. Martin, who also happened to train fighters and produced a local television show, Tomorrow’s Champions, showcasing Louisville’s best boxing talent, responded: “Well, you better learn how to fight before you start challenging people you’re going to whup.” [The world’s greatest boxer was born](#)^{HH}.”



Young people can benefit from knowing that there are people in the world who have fought for themselves and/or the rights of others, and have overcome great obstacles using their own strengths and the encouragement and support of others. They can also benefit from remembering that it’s not just well-known heroes who embody the ability to rise up or plow through a problem. Ordinary people around us are continually demonstrating strength and purpose in their everyday lives, staying strong and not giving up when they lose their job, face a critical illness, or struggle with a difficult or unjust situation. We all have “everyday heroes” in our lives we can look to for inspiration. We can all benefit from believing we are capable of doing heroic things.

For a deeper dive in supporting the development of resilience in the classroom, please see [Nurturing Resilience: A self-directed inquiry group guide](#)^{GG}. Centre for Addictions Research of BC²⁰.

Extend the Learning: Resilience is our “business”!

Have students work in pairs or small groups to create a business idea out of a stress case (they could use one of the stress case scenarios from above or another idea).

Note: If they can’t think of anything, suggest they discuss a T-shirt or bumper sticker business featuring key “stress messages.” For example, a business focussing on promoting self-care might sell T-shirts or stickers that say: “You’re not money. Stop spending yourself!”. Have students share their business ideas and how they came up with the ideas.

Activities for students

1. Opening Activity: Faces of resilience

- Show photographs of the people you have chosen who have demonstrated great resilience. (It could be someone well-known like Anne Frank or Helen Keller. Or it could be someone closer to home, such as your Aunt Mildred who raised 6 children alone after her husband died, or other ordinary people who didn't give up, and have demonstrated great resilience.
- Ask students what they know about the people in the pictures. Share your knowledge about the factors that contributed to the people overcoming obstacles and "kicking butt" on the other side of stress.
- Clarify the definition of resilience: Not just surviving but striving and thriving!
- Emphasize that it's not just famous people who demonstrate resilience.
- Ask students if they can think of anyone—whether famous or from their own lives—who has survived, overcome diversity, and thrived. Have them reflect on or share with the class what those people did to overcome adversity and who helped them.
- If time allows, show this powerful ten-minute video of students who demonstrated the [power of believing that you can improve](#)¹¹ and briefly discuss the factors that contributed to their success.

2. Pair or Small Group Activity: Case studies

- Divide class into pairs or small groups and give each a set of [Case Studies handout](#) to explore.
- Ask students what they would do to handle and/or reduce stress if they were in those situations.
- Ask students to consider ways they might harness stress if they were in each situation (make something out of the situation e.g., a product or service that would help other people).

3. Stress Conference: Preparation

- If possible, give students time to work on their projects and talk to you about any challenges they're having.

4. Wrap Up: Reflection exercise

- Give students a few minutes to write down three or more things they learned today, and what it means to them personally. If desired, give students a [Reflection Exercise handout](#).

Extend the Learning: Arts-based activity ideas (optional):

The concept of 'The Hero's Journey' was described by mythologist Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. While The Hero's Journey describes an archetypal story pattern common in ancient myths as well as modern day adventures, it contains many insights about our everyday lives. If you're interested in exploring this concept further with students, there are [excellent resources available](#)¹¹!

A student, working 15-20 hours a week to save money for a car, learns he needs to help his struggling family with household expenses.

A student learns that her best friend is interested in dating her ex-boyfriend.

A student gets a low mark on a final exam for a course that's been difficult all semester, resulting in the student having to repeat the course in order to go to college.

A student whose parents recently separated is scheduled to do a class presentation that she hasn't prepared well for and isn't in the mood for talking to anyone.

A student learns that his girlfriend has been seeing a person from a different school for a while.

A student who's been having a hard time with a particular teacher is thinking about quitting school.

A low-performing student whose friends are all high achievers is worried about being left behind after graduation.

A student is struggling with math, but no one in his family is strong enough in math to help her.

A student who plays a lead role in a school theatre production is too sick to perform on opening night.

Lesson 6:

Stress Conference

Overview:

Giving students a chance to share and learn from one another's research and hard work can motivate them to keep caring for themselves (and others) through the ups and downs of life.

Learning intentions:

- Students will reflect their own personal interests and learning through sharing their final project
- Students will have an opportunity to showcase the products of their research and creativity with classmates and potentially the larger school community

Preparation:

- Organize classroom (or alternative environment in the school community) to match type of Stress Conference you had in mind.

Make copies of

- Stress Conference Evaluation—1 per student (optional)
- Reflection Exercise—1 per student (optional)

You will need:

- Presentation equipment and supplies

Activities for students

1. Opening Activity: Welcome to our Stress Conference!

- Write "Welcome to our 1st Annual Stress Conference!" on the board.
- Invite students to relax and take some deep breathes as they get seated and prepare to share their stress discoveries and insights with others.

2. Class Activity: Stress Conference Presentations

- Enjoy learning about stress and stress management from your students.
- If desired, use the Stress Conference Evaluation form to assess students' learning and growth.

3. Closing: Congratulations!

- Be sure to congratulate students for a job well done. Thank them for their hard work in researching and preparing for their presentations.
- If desired, and if time permits, give each student a Reflection Exercise handout and allow them time to reflect on the most important things they learned about stress and stress management from their own and other students' presentations.

Extend the Learning: Sharing with peers

Ask students how they can stretch their learning experience by sharing what they learned with others, for example, helping incoming high-schoolers gear up for secondary school by helping them manage their stress?

5 medals/badges of honour

Congratulations! You/your team did a fantastic job at the conference. Your stress-related topic was interesting, your research outstanding, and your presentation left the audience filled with awe and wonder. You clearly put a lot of thought and effort into both what you wanted to share about stress or stress management and how to pull it off in the most effective and stimulating manner.

4 medals/badges of honour

Well done! You/your team were a big hit at the conference. You chose an interesting stress-related topic and clearly did your research. Your presentation was thoughtful and engaging. Your hard work showed, and the audience appreciated what they learned from you about stress or stress management.

3 medals/badges of honour

Nice job! You/your team made a good impression at the conference. Your stress-related research showed promise but could have been stronger or better organized. Your presentation went well and your audience got a lot out of what you had to share about stress or stress management.

2 medals/badges of honour

You/your team put some effort into your stress-related research but more was needed to make your presentation work. A little more thought and care would have gone a long way toward reaching the audience in a meaningful way.

1 medal/badge of honour

Thank you participating in the stress conference!



"We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience."

- John Dewey, 1938

Take a moment to sit back and think about the various student presentations at the Stress Conference.

Which presentation(s) made the biggest impact on you? Why?

What were the most important things you learned about stress and stress management from other students?

What things that you learned today might inspire you to make healthy changes to your own life?

What would you have to do to make those changes?

Besides what you learned today, are there other stress-related things you would like to learn more about?

What could you do to learn more about them?

Resources for School Counsellors

School counsellors play an important role in supporting young people, their parents/ caregivers and the broader school community and are often the “go to” for youth who are experiencing a lot of stress. Here are some tips and helpful resources that might be helpful for counsellors, peer mentors and others who support young people. Be sure to check out the “Whole School” section of this resource for other helpful ideas and resources.

Relationships, relationships, relationships!

As a counsellor, you know how important it is for all of us, at any age, to feel cared about, listened to and connected. Next to family nurturance, the most important protective factor in a young person’s life is feeling connected to school. Having caring adults to lean on in stressful times is crucial to creating an environment where help-seeking is encouraged and supported!



Peers are an important source of support for all of us – including young people! Here are some ideas and resources geared to helping youth support youth within your school community:

- Peer workshops – the Youth Researchers at McCreary Centre Society in BC have designed a workshop geared to helping peer leaders connect and support others in managing life’s challenges. For more on that, email mccreary@mcs.bc.ca
- “The Gift of Listening: a Guide to Mentoring Peers^{LL}” from the Centre for Addictions Research of BC can be helpful in supporting peer mentors, particularly in enhancing their listening skills.
- “Supporting your friends through tough times” and the “Friends” section of mindcheck.ca might also be helpful.

Tools for helping students

Academic related pressures are often cited as top stressors for youth. Here are a few resources that can help in that department. Be sure to share them with teachers too!

Study Guides and Strategies^{MM} an online resource geared to helping learners of middle-school years through adulthood manage academic responsibilities. It includes helpful tips about time management, study skills and other important areas.

Managing Test Anxiety^{NN}

“10 Highly Effective Study Habits^{OO}” from Psych Central

Transitioning from secondary school^{PP} to college or university has its own challenges (and excitement!). This resource is packed with helpful tips for those moving on.

Developmental Relationships grow meaningful learning and help youth flourish. [Click here to view a short video that helps make that point^{KK}.](#)

Here are some other, Canadian, expert-backed resources that might be helpful:

- **thinkFull.ca** – a [stress management app](#)^{QQ} for young people that is full of practical tips and personalized features
- **MindShift Mobile App** - an [anxiety management app](#)^{RR} from Anxiety BC, this app helps youth and young adults manage anxiety, using step-by-step strategies
- **Healthy Minds App** - a [problem solving app](#)^{SS}
- **mindcheck.ca** includes a self-administered stress check quiz, self-care resources and much more geared to supporting the mental health of young people

Stressed Out! How much stress is too much?

Stress becomes a problem when we experience too much of it for too long or when we can't recover from stress. Our bodies and brains were not designed to be in stress mode all the time. When our stress systems get overworked, we are at increased risk for various health and mental health problems.

But even before the more serious stress-related problems start, people usually experience certain symptoms:

- feeling depressed, irritable, angry, anxious or overwhelmed
- fatigue
- lack of interest or motivation
- difficulty concentrating
- tension in the back and shoulders
- trouble sleeping

If your students (or maybe even you!?) are experiencing some of the above symptoms, it may be a sign that stress is becoming a problem. A problem-solving approach that can help them make an action plan to manage their stress might be helpful. [The infographic on the next page](#) can help serve as a tool for reflection and dialogue, helping people consider stress strategies that can work for them.

“Anxiety disorders describe a group of related mental illnesses. A very common myth is that anxiety disorders are the same thing as problems with stress. Anxiety and stress problems can have a lot in common. The difference is that in an anxiety disorder, the symptoms are extreme and don't go away once the stress is over.”

(Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division)

Stress, anxiety - what's the difference?

We often hear the terms “stress” and “anxiety” used interchangeably, especially by teens. They share some similarities but also some important differences. In a nutshell:

Stress: a physiological response to an external threat - real or imagined (stressor).

Anxiety: is an emotional response to events or things that are either not dangerous, or much less harmful than the person perceives, characterized by feelings of tension and worry.

Stress and anxiety are driven by the same physiological processes – what is often referred to as the ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ response. They are both part of normal human experiences and can be helpful at times. But both can be problems if they last for a long time or have an impact on our well-being or functioning in daily life. - **Dr. Robin Alter**, 2017, Trustee, Psychology Foundation of Canada

For more on the difference between stress, anxiety and anxiety disorders, please see this helpful resource from [“Here to Help”, an initiative of the BC Partners on Mental Health and Substance Use](#)^{TT}.

STRESS:

What Can You Do About It?

Am I stressed out?

Some symptoms of being stressed include feeling anxious, constantly irritated, unmotivated, overwhelmed, fatigued, and having trouble sleeping.

Yes

No

Great to hear!

Take a few deep breaths and find healthy ways to relax.

Can I reduce what's causing my stress?

I think so

No

Reducing Stressors

When stress starts to build up, the ideal solution is to reduce the amount you're exposed to

What are my options?

- Solve the problem
- Build knowledge or skills
- Reduce exposure
- Change my behaviour and/or my reactions
- Create boundaries
- Become more organized

Coping with Stress

Some stress cannot be completely reduced. There are two main parts to coping:

- Being able to tolerate stress when it's happening
- Recovering and bouncing back when the stressful situation is over

What strategy works best for your situation?

- Change the way you think
- Reach out for support
- Learn new coping strategies
- Make lifestyle changes
- Seek professional help

Most people need to use both types of strategies to manage their stress at various times.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada can help you, visit us at:

StressStrategies.ca and/or psychologyfoundation.org



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Supporting Parents/Caregivers

School counsellors often act as the link between school and home by providing information to parents/caregivers, and organizing and presenting school community education events. The following resources might be helpful in your efforts to inform and support parents and caregivers:

- Three short articles for parents/caregivers of teens created as part of this resource are [downloadable here](#)
- A wide array of parent focused handouts that cover a range of topics including but not limited to teens and stress. [Every Mind Matters Handouts](#)^{UU}
- The infographic mentioned above can also be helpful for parents – both for their own use and in supporting their children
- [stresstrategies.ca](#) is an online personalized tool designed for helping adults enhance their stress management skills.

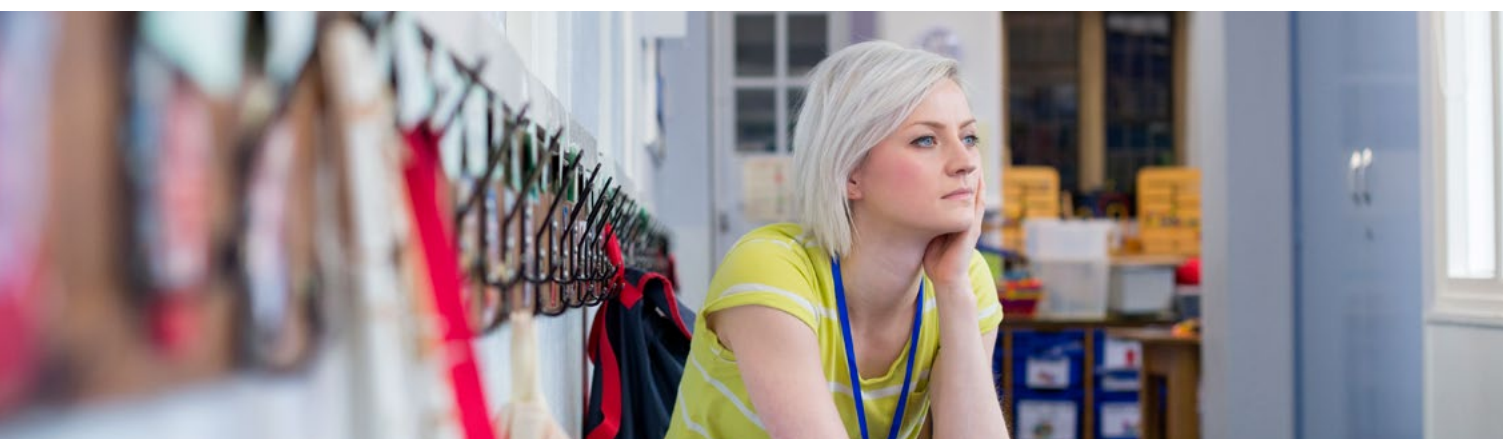


School-wide Ideas and Resources

Our learning spaces matter. A safe, inclusive, healthy, and caring learning environment supports students' cognitive, emotional, social and physical development as well as their resiliency and mental health.

The instructional activities provided in the teacher's section of this resource are designed to help students learn how to best manage stress. While teachers have a role to play, they can't do it alone.

This section provides some evidence-backed ideas and resources for school-wide efforts to foster a supportive school environment, starting with a focus on the adults in the building.



Promoting Mental Health and Well-being of the Adults in Schools

Research demonstrates that stress can be contagious. And, let's face it, teaching can be stressful work – and so too is the work of other school professionals.

Organizational and individual interventions can help minimize the negative effects of stress. This section provides the research, recommendations, and helpful resources and approaches for addressing teacher well-being, many of which have relevance for all the adults in a school. Click to read [Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools](#)^{vv}.

A workplace wellness approach helps promote the health and success of all school staff – and by extension the whole school community. Here are some Canadian resources that could be helpful in promoting the health and well-being of your school community:

- [The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#)^{ww} – the first of its kind in the world, is a set of voluntary guidelines, tools and resources intended to guide organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work.
- To support implementation of the above noted Standard, the [Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace](#)^{xx} offers a wide variety of materials and services aimed at developing a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.
- The "School Team Relationships" section of the [pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health](#)^{yy} includes some helpful tools and activities for reflecting on school-wide positive mental health efforts of relevance to school staff.
- [Stress Strategies](#)^{zz} was developed by The Psychology Foundation of Canada and supported by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace. It is aimed at helping adults better manage the stress in their lives by zeroing in on the problems that are causing their stress and identifying and evaluating possible solutions.
- [The Psychology Foundation of Canada](#)^{ab} has also developed a series of work-life balance related booklets that can be helpful as part of a broader well-being strategy.

Nurture school connectedness

School connectedness is about creating a school community where everyone feels safe, seen, heard, supported, significant and cared for (BC School Based Mental Health Coalition, 2013). The focus in school connectedness is on building strong, positive relationships: among students; between students and school staff; and, between school staff, families and the larger community. The presence of caring relationships in schools — the heart of school connectedness — is increasingly recognized as a vital component of successful schools. The research is strong and consistent--students who feel connected to school do better academically and are healthier – and can cope better with what life throws at them! [Click here^{AC}](#) for more on school connectedness, including school-based stories and practical strategies.

Research proves what intuitively feels right: the teacher-student relationship is key for successful learning. [The Canadian Education Association^{AD}](#), with the support of the Canadian School Boards Association, produced this short summary.

This resource from the [American Psychological Association^{AE}](#) provides more evidence-backed tips and strategies that you might want to share with your colleagues.

Give students voice and choice

Having a voice and the ability to make choices are both key to building high-quality learning experiences and resiliency. Engaging youth in meaningful ways confers many benefits and builds young peoples' competencies. The "[Youth Engagement Toolkit^{AF}](#)" (2014) from the pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health can help.

Acknowledge stress and challenges happen in life (and that can be good thing!)

Life experiences such as immunizations, relationship challenges, demanding workloads, and transitions are realities of life – and can also be stressful. They are also great opportunities to normalize the idea that sometimes life can be stressful, and that with support and skills we can get through those challenging times.

Reduce the stress load for youth where it makes sense

Schools themselves add unnecessary stress to youths' lives. Have a look at the school schedule and consider opportunities to reduce some of the demands. Inviting youth to be part of this conversation is a great place to start (just not during busy times of the year!). Some of the learning activities within this resource might be helpful in sparking some school-wide changes.

Provide a stress-friendly school environment

A healthy diet, physical activity, friends, caring and supportive adults, adequate rest and sleep, the time and space to relax -- these are the basic tools for coping with stress. Take a look at your school and explore opportunities for fostering a culture and place that promotes the health and learning of youth – and helps create conditions that are helpful when it comes to managing stress.

Speaking of sleep, there's solid evidence that later start times support the health and learning of teens. While not always easy to do, it's worth considering options. [This paper from the American Pediatrics Association^{AG}](#) provides ample food for thought on this important matter.

Here are some other ideas and helpful resources for school-wide activities:

- Some of the learning activities featured in the teacher's section of this resource might be of interest to pick up on for school-wide use (e.g., senior students can develop a session geared to helping grade 9 students prepare for exams; school-wide social marketing campaign geared to sharing stress management related tips and strategies).
- As the term wraps up and exams and deadlines near, a few little touches of TLC (tender loving care) can be helpful. These can include: acknowledging this is a stressful time for many, offering words of encouragement and support, and cutting youth some slack in stressful times. None of us are at our best when we're stressed out. Empathy and a friendly smile or kind word can go a long way in helping us feel better and cope with what life throws at us.
- During strategic times of year, consider offering sessions geared to helping students address some of their academic challenges. This might help: [Queen's University's "ultimate anti-procrastination tool"^{AH}](#).

- Tests and exams are stress-inducing for most of us. Helping young people learn strategies for reducing their stress at those times may be key to their academic survival and success. [Click here for a resource that can help](#)^{AI} – and can provide a springboard for conversation in classrooms as to what’s helpful in reducing one’s stress during particularly stressful tasks that you can’t get out of.
- Host school-wide, fun-focused chill breaks, which are always nice to have but particularly so at stressful times of year! Here are a few ideas: a little pet therapy (for a Canadian example, check out BARK at UBC Okanagan), recess (since no one’s ever too old for a recess break), noon- time yoga classes, teachers vs. students basketball game, or other fun ways to help re-energize and have a great time!
- A “chill-out” room (or whatever youth-friendly name you want to give it) can help students feel valued and cared about – and gives them a safe place to just hang out, reflect and relax. There’s nothing like crashing on a beanbag chair or comfy couch, alongside a friend or with some good music to help get in a more relaxed state.
- While the concept of a ‘Buddy Bench’ might seem a bit juvenile for secondary schools, the thinking behind this concept of creating an environment where people can connect with a friendly face and a caring person or two, has universal relevance. [Consider this CBC article about loneliness](#)^{AJ} and explore what can be done to intentionally foster an environment where everyone has a sense of belonging, and a friend or two (or more!).
- **Nature nurtures.** [Learning outside in nature has a multitude of benefits](#)^{AK}. Research suggests that when people are exposed to natural elements inside, they “are likely to feel better and experience greater well-being when their environments are in synch (are matched) with their human nature.” [Click here for some ideas that may plant a few seeds for nurturing a ‘nature fix’ in your school](#)^{AL}.
- Transitions are important. [This tool from the UCLA-based Center on Mental Health may be helpful in addressing efforts to strengthen student transition supports](#)^{AM}, whether it be moving in to secondary school or post-secondary life. As the Center notes, “transition periods provide opportunities to promote healthy development, reduce alienation and increase positive attitudes toward school and learning, address systemic and personal barriers to learning and teaching, and re-engage disconnected students and families”.

Looking for more evidence or resources related to comprehensive, school-centred efforts to promote mental health? Check these out:

- [The Canadian Education Association has produced a brief summary](#)^{AN} that speaks to the need for building students’ coping skills and creating school conditions that nurture mental health and learning.
- [The Joint Consortium for School Health has also developed a toolkit](#)^{AO} designed to promote positive mental health in schools.
- [School Mental Health Assist](#)^{AP} is an implementation support team designed to help Ontario school boards to promote student mental health and well-being. This support is provided via leadership and coordination, resources, and implementation coaching support. While Ontario focused, many of their resources are available online.
- [TeenMentalHealth.org](#)^{AQ} shares information, resources and tools for parents, friends, health professionals, educators and others interested in learning more and caring for our youth.
- [WellAhead](#)^{AR}, led by The McConnell Foundation in collaboration with many across Canada, has a list of additional recommended resources.

Getting enough?

Teens need 9-10 hours of sleep each night. Invite a class or a group of interested students to develop a school wide social marketing campaign geared to helping their peers learn more about the value of sleep and how to get enough.

[The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)^{AS} (aged 5-17), released in 2016, integrate physical activity, sleep and sedentary time.

Resources for Parents and Caregivers

School professionals and researchers agree that when parents are engaged meaningfully in their lives and learning, children are more likely to succeed in school. The same goes for helping young people learn to manage stress.

The Psychology Foundation of Canada has produced a few tip sheets geared to helping parents/caregivers help their children strengthen their stress management skills. They are included in the following pages. Please share.

Here are a few other resources that might be of interest to share with parents, school staff and others:

- stresstrategies.ca - an online problem solving tool geared to helping adults strengthen their stress management skills.
- [Straight Talk About Teens Booklet^{AT}](#) – a practical resource for parents/caregivers of teens, a resource from our Parenting for Life series.
- To help immigrant and refugee parents support their children, [the Psychology Foundation of Canada has developed a series of tip sheets focused on parents of pre-teens^{AU}](#). Available in over 10 languages.
- [Struggle to Juggle^{AV}](#) – a booklet for parents/caregivers as they “struggle to juggle” life’s demands, from our [Workplace Life Balance Series of booklets](#).
- [“Option B - Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy^{AW}”](#) (2017), written by Sheryl Sandberg, an executive with Facebook, and psychologist Adam Grant, a book about facing adversity, building resilience, and finding joy. For more, including thought provoking videos and tips for daily practice, click on the title.



Parenting Tip Sheet #1

Stress and Your Teen

“Are we being educated about what different levels of stress feel like, and how we can deal with it? Are we given tools to deal with it?”

No, we’re not. A lot of youth don’t know what it feels like to relax.”

- Respondent to BC Adolescent Health Survey

If your teenager seems more stressed out than you were at the same age, it’s not your imagination. Surveys show that today’s teens are dealing with higher levels of stress than past generations. Learning about stress and how to manage it helps children and youth become resilient in the face of life’s challenges and difficulties.

But first, let’s remember that stress is not always a bad thing. Stress is a normal part of life that can even be good for us. Our body’s stress response can give us the boost of energy that helps us meet challenges that lead to personal growth, that allows us to work hard and compete when we need to. Stress becomes a problem when we experience too much of it for too long, and haven’t learned healthy ways to manage and recover from negative stress.

“Stress makes the world go ‘round. It’s what leads us to adapt, what leads us to find solutions to problems, and leads us to explore the universe...”

- Dr. Stan Kutcher- Teen Mental Health.org

The problem with excessive stress

When the stress system works overtime the parts of the brain that help us think, learn, make good decisions and get along with people gets blocked. The “survival” part of the brain takes over and it is hard to think things through. Too much stress can cause emotional, social, learning, behaviour, mental health and physical health problems.

Signs that Stress is Becoming a Problem

- Increased irritability, sadness, anxiety or panic
- Trouble falling asleep
- Undereating or overeating
- A pattern of overreacting to minor problems
- An increase in nervous habits like nail biting or hair twisting
- Social withdrawal or difficulty getting along with others
- Concentration or motivation problems

All of the above problems can have other causes as well. But, remember that some emotional and behaviour problems that parents think of as “misbehavior” or “attitude” can often be signs of excessive stress.



Teen Brain Development and Stress

During the teen years important brain development is still taking place in the parts of the brain that are responsible for judging risks and rewards, decision making, planning and understanding social and emotional information. The adolescent years are also a time of increased sensitivity to stress. Mental health problems often begin during this time in people's lives. All underscoring just how important it is that we help youth better manage life's inevitable stressful times.

“I get stressed about meeting expectations – you see that in the classroom all the time”

“By the time I'm finished with school and work I just have nothing left.”

- Respondents to BC Adolescent Health Survey

What Stresses Teenagers?

- **School:** homework, juggling schoolwork with extra-curricular activities. This type of stress intensifies towards the end of high school when young people are faced with important decisions about post-secondary education and careers.
- **Relationships:** relationship problems, feeling isolated, being bullied or victimized
- **Conflict:** with parents, friends, teachers and others
- **Money:** not having enough, having less money than one's friends, worry about the cost of post-secondary education
- **Challenging or negative life events:** a death in the family, family member's illness, the loss of a loved one, moving to a new neighbourhood or town
- **Social media:** most teens enjoy social media but they can also find it stressful.

Dealing with stress

The first step is recognizing when you are stressed and what is causing the stress. Some symptoms of being stressed out include feeling anxious, constantly irritated, unmotivated, overwhelmed, tired and having trouble sleeping.

Once we learn to recognize stress, there are two main ways of managing it: reducing stress and coping with stress.

Reducing Stress

When stress starts building up the ideal solution is to reduce the amount you are exposed to. Reducing your stress load:

- prevents your stress response system from working too hard
- leaves you with more mental and physical energy for other priorities
- gives you more energy for coping with unavoidable stress

Coping with Stress

Some kinds of stress cannot be reduced. However we can still find ways to cope. Coping well means being able to tolerate stress when it's happening, and recovering – bouncing back – when the stressful situation is over.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and at psychologyfoundation.org.

Parenting Tip Sheet #2

Helping your Teen with Stress

Too much stress can have negative effects on teenagers' mood, behaviour, learning, health and the ability to get along with others. As parents, our goal is not to eliminate all stress (that's impossible anyway) though we can help our teens learn to recognize, deal with and recover from stress. Here are some ways to help.

Recognize the signs

Sometimes teenagers will recognize that they are highly stressed and they may even be able to deal with it pretty well. Other times they may need our help to understand what is going on. That's why it is important to watch for the signs of stress in their feelings and behaviour. These may include:

- unusual irritability, sadness, anxiety or panic
- behaviour that seems out of character
- undereating or overeating
- sleep problems
- a pattern of overreacting to minor problems
- social withdrawal or difficulty getting along with others
- difficulties with concentration and motivation about school or other activities

Identify the source of stress

After recognizing that your teen seems to need help dealing with excess stress, the next step is figuring out what the stressors are. All kinds of things can cause stress for older teenagers, the desire for independence, school and planning for college or employment, to relationships, to not having enough money and busy schedules. Today's teens are dealing with new sources of stress. That includes some things we don't usually think of as stressful, like not getting enough sleep, over-exposure to screen time and the pressures of social media.

Help them manage stress

Reduce the source of stress when possible

Once the source of stress is known, try talking with your teen about what they might be able to do to reduce it. Could they spend less time with certain people or in situations that they find stressful? Do they need more sleep or help solving a problem? Be careful with these conversations. Teenagers like to be independent and can be easily turned off when parents act like they know what's best.

Help them solve problems

When stress is caused by a specific problem, it can often be reduced by finding a solution. Problem-solving is not always easy. But if you can encourage and help your teen develop the ability to think about and solve problems that are causing stress, you will be helping to build a very important stress management skill. One way to guide your child in solving problems is by helping them break it into smaller pieces, and work on one piece at a time together towards the "hoped for" end result.

Encourage your child to find and use positive coping strategies

People have various ways of coping with stress: listening to music, talking problems over with friends, deep breathing, yoga, meditation, doing hobbies or favourite activities. Many people find that physical activity helps get rid of the tension. Not everybody copes the same way. The point is to help teens figure out what works for them. Role modeling positive coping strategies for your teen is also helpful!

Provide a stress-friendly home base

A healthy diet, enough sleep and physical activity, the time and space to relax. These are the basic tools for coping with stress. Teenager's social, school and work lives can be stressful at times. So try to make your home a haven as much as possible. And do your best to model healthy stress awareness and management.

Maintain a positive relationship

Almost any positive influence you want to have on your teenager depends on a good relationship. Older teens spend less time with us and more time with their friends. They may also challenge our authority. This can make parent-child relationships more challenging. So try to grab small opportunities to spend time together as often as you can.

Build stress awareness

Talk about stress with your teen. What stresses you? What do they find stressful? What helps them cope and recover from stress. These conversations help to build the stress awareness that will help young people learn to understand and manage their own stress. Listen more than talk. Be aware of the effort they've put into managing their stress.

Gently challenge negative thoughts

Sometimes, our negative thoughts can make our stress worse. So, if your teenager seems locked into negative thinking, look for ways to gently challenge their negative thoughts. Gently is the key word. You don't want to get into an argument about it. But you can show them a more hopeful way to look at a stressful situation. Role modelling positive thinking is also helpful.

Provide practical support

If your teen is facing a stressful time – exams, an unusually busy schedule or some sort of crisis with school or friends – your TLC (“tender loving care”) can help. Give them rides when they are pressed for time. Prepare their favourite meals. Temporarily reduce their home responsibilities or chores if they are extra busy. Small gestures of support can mean a lot.

Hear the concerns from your teen's perspective

As parents, we often want to rescue and protect teenagers so we tell them what we think their problem is and what they should do. But often the best thing to do is to pause and really try to listen. What are they feeling that tells them they are stressed? What are they worried about? Your non-judgmental listening and support helps them feel cared for and understood. It can also help teens understand their own stress and solutions that make sense to them.

Three ways to avoid increasing your teen's stress

1. Try not to lecture, raise your voice or criticize when your teenager seems stressed out. Instead lower your voice and speak in a neutral way that will help them calm down.
2. Don't be too quick to offer solutions to their problems. When teens are highly stressed, they won't really be able to hear your message. And insisting that they accept your solution may add to their stress.
3. Postpone discipline when your child is stressed out. Focus on calming upset feelings and not increasing stress. If a consequence or conversation about their behaviour is necessary, it can wait.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and at psychologyfoundation.org.

Parenting Tip Sheet #3

Stress Management 101 for Parents

Want to help your teenager deal with stress and learn stress management strategies? A great way to start is to tune into and deal with your own stress.

Why?

- Better parenting. We do most things better, including parenting, when we are not affected by excess stress.
- Your excess stress can affect your family. A 2010 online survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that 86 percent of tweens and teens said they were bothered by their parents' stress.
- Teaching by example. Kids learn from what we do even more than what we say. When you manage your stress effectively your teenager learns valuable life lessons about stress management.

“How you deal with your own stress is linked to how you help teens, how they experience stress, and how they learn to cope with their stress,” says Dr. Robin Alter, psychologist.

Keys to Managing your Stress

Awareness

An important first step in managing your stress is stress awareness.

- How do you know when you are overstressed? For example, is your body tense, are you irritable, anxious, moody. Are you feeling overwhelmed or do you often have trouble concentrating? Those are signs of stress.
- What kinds of situations, people or experiences are stressful for you?
- Which of these stressors affect you most often?

Dealing with stress

We have two main ways of managing stress: reducing stress and coping with stress.

Reducing Stress

When stress starts building up the ideal solution is to reduce the amount you are exposed to. Reducing your stress load:

- prevents your stress response system from working too hard
- leaves you with more mental and physical energy for other priorities
- gives you more energy for coping with unavoidable stress

Coping with Stress

Some kinds of stress cannot be reduced. However, we can still find ways to cope. Coping well means being able to tolerate stress when it's happening, and recovering – bouncing back – when the stressful situation is over.

Strategies for Reducing Stress

Problem-solve

Some stress is caused by problems that can be solved. Find the solution and your stress will be reduced.

Build knowledge and skills

Increasing our knowledge and skills can often help us deal with difficult situations or challenges more effectively and reduce the stress we experience in those situations. For example, starting a new job can be stressful. But learning about the job and getting trained in the skills you need can reduce that stress.

Reduce time spent in stressful situations

We can't avoid all stress, nor should we. Some stress occurs in situations and challenges that we cannot or should not avoid. But sometimes we spend more time than necessary in stressful situations or in the company of people who cause us stress.

Change your behaviour

When we can't avoid a stressful situation, we can sometimes change the way we behave in that situation in ways that reduce the stress we experience. For example, learning to stay calm and speak in a neutral voice when talking with our teenagers about discipline issues can make it less likely that they will respond in a hostile manner. That reduces the stress we feel and helps those conversations go more smoothly.

Create boundaries

Setting personal boundaries can often keep us from being caught up in situations that cause us stress, such as trying to do more things than we really have time for, trying to be perfect rather than good enough, or saying yes when we should say no.

Get organized

Being disorganized can be stressful. Work and commitments pile up. We miss appointments and opportunities. We waste energy because we're always a bit behind and trying to catch up.

Coping with Stress

People have various positive ways of coping with stress. Some people listen to music, go for a run or do yoga. Some people pray or meditate, and some reach to friends and loved ones for support. Other coping strategies like using alcohol or drugs, overeating, or bingeing on screen time are less effective and can cause harm.

Here are five main categories of coping strategies that you might find helpful:

Change your thinking

Negative thoughts can cause or heighten negative emotions in a way that makes stress harder to cope with. Changing the way we think about our stress, and learning to challenge our negative thoughts, can improve our ability to cope.

Reach out for support

Getting support from other people is one of our most basic and important ways of coping with stress. Look for support from family members, friends, work colleagues and fellow members of support or activity groups

Learn new coping strategies

Are the coping strategies you use right now working for you? Maybe you can learn new and better ones; www.stressstrategies.ca has a wealth of information about positive coping strategies.

Make lifestyle changes

A healthy lifestyle – getting enough rest, exercise and nutrition, making time for the things you enjoy and avoiding less healthy lifestyle choices – keeps your brain and body well equipped to help you cope with and recover from stress.

Seek professional help

Sometimes stress builds up to the point where we find we can't handle it ourselves. That's the time when seeking professional help is the best thing you can do to help yourself and your family.

Find out more.

You can find more great information and helpful tips about stress management at StressStrategies.ca and at psychologyfoundation.org.

Teacher Reflection

Teachers can prepare to use Stress Lessons by reflecting on their own relationship with stress and resilience over time.

- Thinking back to when you were in high school, what kind of things stressed you out the most? How did you respond to stressful situations? What did you do to relieve or cope with stress?
- If you could go back and talk to your younger self about stress, what would you say to yourself?
- Think of a time in your past when you demonstrated resilience (a time when you struggled with or failed at something but worked through it and found a way to shine on the other side). What did you do? What did it feel like? What does it feel like now?
- What things stress you out now? Why? How do you know you're stressed?
- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your ability to manage stress in your life? Why?
- What things do you do to prevent stress in your life?
- What things do you do to cope with stress when you're feeling it?
- Based on your teaching experiences, what do you think stresses teens out? How do they express it?
- What things do you do to reduce stress and build resilience in the classroom? What more could you do?
- Thinking back to when you were in high school, what kind of things stressed you out the most? How did you respond to stressful situations? What did you do to relieve or cope?

Classroom checklist*

- Do you celebrate failure in the class and encourage risk-taking? How do you respond when a student gives an incorrect answer or an interpretation that is off-base. These are small moments to encourage students to take risks
- In what form is feedback delivered to students? Is feedback auxiliary to the class or is it a core component. How do you hold students responsible for using the feedback and promote growth in their work? How does constructive criticism flow in the class-teacher to student? Student to student? Student to teacher?
- Do you model resiliency in class? How do you respond to adversity in the class? If a part of the lesson is not flowing as anticipated do you show frustration? If some piece of technology is failing, what is your response? Are you as aware of your body language as you are of the words you choose?
- What is the role of revisions? Can students rewrite essays and papers? Do students receive an opportunity to run an experiment another time? Can you promote opportunities to renew or revise that will help develop these habits of mind.
- Are you explicitly developing the skill? Are you looking at teaching and assessing resilience in a traditional manner or are you considering this to be a skill that needs to be practiced and honed?

*Adapted from [Edutopia](#)^{AX}

Given the hectic schedule and demands of the school day, it's not always realistic to work a yoga session or other stress relieving activities into every day.

Even if you only have a few minutes to yourself between dealing with the pressures of the school environment and the demands of students, find a window nearby and focus on the world outside. It can provide a moment of reflection that will help you reframe your stress and regain a sense of calm and well-being.

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