

Learn. Disrupt. Rebuild @HWDSB: BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CARE

Module 1: Physical & Mental Health and Safety

Lesson # 6 The Upside and Downside of Stress

Learning Goal: To understand and identify that stress can have positive and negative influence on our daily lives, and strategies that help mitigate the stress response.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Stress** - Describes the feelings we get when we are struggling to cope with a situation. Sometimes stress is a normal, healthy reaction to an external pressure, but at other times it can become overwhelming and difficult to manage. Physical symptoms of stress can include headaches, an increased heart rate, or an upset stomach.
- **Stressors** - A stressor is anything that causes the release of stress hormones.

Educator Pre-Reflection:

Before engaging in this lesson, consider/think about...

What is stress? When do we as educators experience stress? What causes us stress? Stress refers to “a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances” (The Psychology Foundation of Canada, 2020).

Now consider how we, as educators, feel when we are stressed. What is the stress response? 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 (Psychology Foundation of Canada)”. Some of these threats include but are not limited to:

- A physical threat such as being chased or faced with a natural disaster
- An emotional circumstance such as a frustrating conversation with a student or friend or a deadline

In our work as educators, a certain amount of stress can be useful. We can also recognize that sometimes stress isn’t avoidable. How can we support our students in recognizing when their stress systems are overworked? What tangible or intangible tools can we bolster in students to manage their stress?

Student Pre-Reflection:

Before you begin, think about...

Think about times in the school day where you may feel “stressed out”. Do you feel stressed out before a test or quiz? An important sports game or swim meet? Getting on a bus? A big performance? Catching COVID-19 or any other illness? Social media apps and social media usage? Experiencing bullying? Participating in civic action?

Now think about how that stress “feels” like. Does your heart race? You start sweating a lot? Maybe you freeze? These physical feelings refer to the “stress response” or “fight/flight/freeze response”, which is a biological and psychological response we experience on encountering what our body perceives as a threat (a quiz or test, for example).

It may feel like stress is unavoidable! However, it is important to understand that our bodies are not designed to be in “stress mode” all the time. There are positive and negative effects of stress! It is useful to learn how to challenge the ways we think about stress.

Provocation / Minds-on

Teacher Prompt:

What are the upsides and downsides of stress?

Encourage students to reflect on times in school when they have experienced a “stress response”, and how it might have affected them positively and negatively. Ask students to also include how they physically experienced stress in this moment. Depending on engagement, a T-Chart between each pair or on the board can be created to capture student responses.

Teacher Example: *“When I must present in front of my colleagues, my heart starts to race, and my hands get very cold. It affects me negatively because I talk faster in my presentation, and it affects me positively because I feel a little bit braver”.*

Adapted from The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

Learning Task/Activity:

Teacher Note: Stress and the stress response can have positive and negative influence on our lives. Excessive stress can interfere with students’ memory and attention abilities in the classroom. This learning task looks to reinforce the importance of having coping and destressing strategies in students’ day-to-day lives, as well as their peers.

The goal is to identify stressors, stress response, and possibly coping strategies and apply them to the following case studies. Have students read the case studies, respond to the questions and share their responses if desired.

Case Study 1

Roger was a grade 12 student has experienced agoraphobia and acute anxiety for several years which he had managed well since beginning high school. When he became particularly worried or stressed, he experienced anxiety attacks and his blood pressure would rise. Since being in high school, a range of support measures were put in place, such as being able to pre-visit classrooms and new spaces. This year, Roger decided to pursue a co-op placement. However, he was particularly worried about how he would manage this new and demanding experience, as well as keep his grades up for college and scholarships.

- What are Roger’s stressors?
- What did Roger experience as a stress response?
- What coping strategies could potentially be utilized by Roger?

Case Study 2:

John is a grade 10 student who enjoys his physical education and nutrition classes. When John was younger, he witnessed a lot of violence in the country he grew up in. Whenever he hears yelling, loud noises, or glass

breaking, his heart begins to race, he feels dizzy, and afterwards, begins to feel sad and confused. Sometimes, John has difficulty sleeping, which impacts his concentration in school.

- What are John’s stressors?
- What did John experience as a stress response?
- What coping strategies could potentially be utilized by John?

Case Study 3

Naomi is in grade 9. She uses a lot of social media apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Naomi likes to follow many “influencers” who wear expensive clothes, live in large homes, and have stylized photoshoots. Naomi spends 1-2 hours before bed on her phone scrolling through these apps. She often feels jealous after looking at influencers’ photos and frustrated to have not dedicated enough time to homework and other activities.

- What are Naomi’s stressors?
- What did Naomi experience as a stress response?
- What coping strategies could potentially be utilized by Naomi?

Ideas for Follow up / Discussion:

- **The Science of Stress:** Exploring the science behind a stress response explains how our brain and different systems of the body are involved when our heart races, our palms start to sweat, or our vision becomes blurry. To extend this lesson, explore the fight/flight/freeze response by talking about the amygdala, sympathetic nervous system, and parasympathetic nervous system.
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>
- **Stress Tests:** There are many online “stress tests” designed to help us understand what factors in our lives contribute to our “stress”. Remember, any test online is not a substitute for complete answers but can help begin a conversation with your health practitioner, social worker, or caring adult.
 - <https://www.meettheself.com/stress-quiz-for-kids/>
 - <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/test-anxiety.html>
 - <https://www.bemindfulonline.com/test-your-stress>
- **Stress and Teenage Brain:** Chronic stress and activation of the fight, flight, or freeze response can have serious implications on the developing teenage brain. The brain is understood to be developing well into a young person’s twenties. Encourage students to understand their developing brains.

Educator Post-Reflection:

- What are my stressors?
- What do I experience as a stress response?
- What coping strategies could I potentially use?

Student Post-Reflection:

- What are my stressors?
- What do I experience as a stress response?
- What coping strategies could I potentially use?

Further Resources:

[Racial Wellness Toolbox](#)
[Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programs of Study](#)

Curriculum Connections:

The lessons included in **Learn. Disrupt. Rebuild@HWDSB** align with the [Ontario Curriculum](#) across several subject areas, as articulated within the [Considerations for Program Planning](#) (i.e., front matter) applicable to all curriculum documents, Grades 1 to 12. Educators must consider this information to guide the implementation of curriculum and in creating the environment in which it is taught. These considerations include areas such as Student Well-being and Mental Health; Healthy Relationships; Human Rights, Equity and Inclusive Education. Outlined below is the specific language that has been used to align Learn. Disrupt. Rebuild@HWDSB with the Ontario Curriculum across several secondary subject areas.

<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/curriculum#secondary>

The Arts (2010)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ARTS

Healthy relationships are based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity, and thrive in an environment in which diversity is honoured and accepted. To experience themselves as valued and connected members of an inclusive social environment, students need to be involved in healthy relationships with their peers, teachers, and other members of the school community (p.36).

Canadian and World Studies - (2018/2015)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND CANADIAN AND WORLD STUDIES

Every student is entitled to learn in a safe, caring environment, free from violence and harassment. Research has shown that students learn and achieve better in such environments. A safe and supportive social environment in a school is founded on healthy relationships – the relationships between students, between students and adults, and between adults. Healthy relationships are based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity, and thrive in an environment in which diversity is honoured and accepted. Healthy relationships do not tolerate abusive, controlling, violent, bullying/harassing, or other inappropriate behaviours. To experience themselves as valued and connected members of an inclusive social environment, students need to be involved in healthy relationships with their peers, teachers, and other members of the school community (p.47/p. 53).

Classical Studies and International Languages (2016)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND CLASSICAL STUDIES AND INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGES

Every student is entitled to learn in a safe, caring environment, free from violence and harassment. Research has shown that students learn and achieve better in such environments. A safe and supportive social

environment in a school is founded on healthy relationships – the relationships between students, between students and adults, and between adults. Healthy relationships are based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity, and thrive in an environment in which diversity is honoured and accepted (p.46).

Cooperative Education (2018)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

Every student is entitled to learn in a safe, caring environment, free from violence and harassment. Research has shown that students learn and achieve better in such environments. A safe and supportive social environment in a school is founded on healthy relationships - the relationships between students, between students and adults, and between adults. Healthy relationships are based on respect, caring, empathy, trust, and dignity, and thrive in an environment in which diversity is honoured and accepted (p. 60-61)

French as a Second Language (2014)

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' WELL-BEING AND ABILITY TO LEARN

Educators play an important role in promoting children and youth's well-being by creating, fostering, and sustaining a learning environment that is healthy, caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting. (p.3)

Health and Physical Education (2015)

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Mental health concepts are included within all content areas of the Healthy Living strand. The focus in this strand is on promoting and maintaining mental health, building an understanding of mental illness, and reducing stigma and stereotypes. (p. 42).

Social Sciences and Humanities (2013)

SUPPORTING STUDENTS' WELL-BEING AND ABILITY TO LEARN

Educators play an important role in promoting children and youth's well-being by creating, fostering, and sustaining a learning environment that is healthy, caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting. A learning environment of this kind will support not only students' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development but also their mental health, their resilience, and their overall state of well-being. All this will help them achieve their full potential in school and in life.

The Role of Mental Health: Mental health touches all components of development. Mental health is much more than the absence of mental illness. Well-being is influenced not only by the absence of problems and risks but by the presence of factors that contribute to healthy growth and development. By nurturing and supporting students' strengths and assets, educators help promote positive mental health in the classroom (p.6).

Technological Education (2009)

Health and Safety in Technological Education

Teachers are responsible for ensuring the safety of students during technology lab, shop, and classroom activities. Health and safety issues must also be addressed when learning involves cooperative education and other workplace experiences (see p. 39). Teachers need to encourage and motivate students to assume responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others, and they must help students develop the

knowledge and skills needed for safe participation in all technology-related activities. For these reasons, teachers must model safe practices at all times and communicate safety expectations to students in accordance with school board policies and procedures, Ministry of Education policies, and Ministry of Labour regulations.

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