

Dealing with Student Stress

Identifying stress issues that most affect your students can be extremely valuable for them as well as you. Studies show that common stress issues for students include test anxiety, financial worries, relationship conflicts, and home/ parent problems. In the classroom these are at best distractions and at worst completely disruptive to learning. Students can increase their awareness of various stressors and discover new strategies to reduce them through the following exercise.

PURPOSE: To give students an opportunity to (1) Identify sources of their stress, (2) Learn new strategies for managing stress, (3) Select strategies they will implement

SUPPLIES/SET UP: (1) Dry erase pen or chalk, (2) 3x5 cards (one per student), (3) Coloring tools (pens, crayons, pencils)

DIRECTIONS: Total time 30-45 minutes (follow up evaluation one week later)

1. Personalize the activity by asking the class, "What are stresses that students' face?" Write their responses on the board so they can see the list of stressors and recognize them in their own lives. (5 minutes)
2. Next ask, "What if you had a list of strategies on how to reduce your stress?" This activity will help you create your personal Top-Ten Stress Busters list so that you have numerous ways to reduce your stress.
3. Give them the definition of stress as "any interference that disturbs a person's physical or mental well being." Discuss the impact of persistent stress including emotional issues such as anger, anxiety, depression, as well as physical symptoms such as poor digestion, suppressed immune system, high blood pressure, ulcers, insomnia, and fatigue. Ask students to add any other symptoms they might be experiencing. (5-10 minutes)
4. Tell the class, "We have been focusing on the source and symptoms of stress, but now let's look at solutions. Let's start with what NOT to do. What are some unhealthy ways of dealing with stress?" Write their ideas on the board. When they are out of ideas, add any that you think might have been missed from the lists below. (5 minutes)
5. Now brainstorm healthy stress reduction techniques, writing students' ideas on the board. (10 minutes)
6. Once the students have exhausted all their ideas for healthy stress reduction, add any others omitted from the list below. (5 minutes)
7. Hand out a 3x5 card to the students and ask them to write their personal top 10 Stress Busters. Provide coloring utensils so that students can decorate their card to make it more pleasing or inspiring. (10 minutes)
8. Ask students to decide on one place they will post their top ten-list/menu card as a reminder. Have the class brainstorm all the places they could post their top ten list. Suggest that they look at the card during the week and report back on the impact the card had. (5 minutes)
9. After a week, offer an evaluation to follow up on the impact of the exercise. Ask questions like "What did you learn? What did you like and/or dislike?" How would you change, modify or improve this activity? Where did you post your card? Did you look at your card? What impact did it have on your stress?



EXPERIENCES

When you ask students to share what stressors they face, many will take this as an opportunity to vent. Common stressors included conflicts with parents ("My mom is driving me crazy!"), preparing for exams, meeting deadlines for multiple classes, making ends meet with their limited budgets, body image issues, time management, and romantic relationship conflicts. Some will seem relieved to speak about their stressors while others will appear to get down or depressed when discussing the stressors. When you ask the students to record their ideas about healthy stress reducers, there will be an immediate shift in the room. Some students will even change their body posture and sit up straight. Those who appeared down will be relieved to discuss solutions rather than stay focused on the stressors. Remind them that we are motivated by avoiding pain and by seeking pleasure. So, taking a moment to see how bad the stress is first is a good idea as it might increase their motivation to seek solutions and make changes. Students should notice a pattern of suggestions. Many will include exercise, social support, and meditation (anything that causes you to be deeply relaxed), and then looked for activities that incorporate all three. Dancing may be a favorite stress reliever because it might include being with friends, sweating out angst, and tapping into one's inner self.

The following are some of the physiological and emotional effects of stress. This will be helpful to supplement the lists that students derive.

Physiology - The release of chemicals called cortisol and epinephrine (adrenaline) increases heart rate, metabolism, breathing, muscle tension, and blood pressure. (Fight or Flight) Releases 1,400 chemical reactions in your body, some continuing for hours after the stressor that caused it has passed.

Too much stress inhibits: digestion, growth, tissue repair, and response of your immune system and inflammatory systems. Studies show that:

- (1) people with high stress are twice as likely to develop colds as those with low-stress,
- (2) 70-80% of doctor visits are stress-related illnesses. Ex: high blood pressure, headaches, backaches, indigestion, ulcers, diarrhea, fatigue, insomnia, physical weakness

The negative emotional effects of stress include: anger, hostility, irritability, anxiety, sadness, depression, and powerlessness.

Healthy stress reduction techniques involve choosing new behaviors patterns and thoughts. Learn to separate from an external stressor, resolve incompletes - take care of it now!, keep your finances organized, delegate, say "NO" - understand your boundaries, exercise, relax, breathe deeply, get a massage, do something (anything!) towards your goals, listen to uplifting music, and LAUGH.

Healthy stress reduction techniques involve choosing new thoughts. Try to: visualize problems and troubles shrinking to a manageable size, take a mental vacation, challenge pessimistic beliefs, focus on the positive, find the opportunity in the problem, ask yourself "Will this matter one year from now?", assume the best not the worst possible outcome, face the fear, identify your hurt, forgive.



SOURCE:

This activity was created from Skip Downing's On Course text 4th edition (Houghton Mifflin), and conducted by Gabrielle Siemion, Counselor, Santa Barbara City College.

