Stress and Achievement

Summer Igaz, MSW, LICSW
School Based Mental Health Counselor
Swedish @ Skyline High School
Goals Today

- Introduction of School Based Mental Health in the ISD
- Language/Types of Stress and Understanding the Stress Response
- Stress As it Relates to Performance and Achievement
- Healthy Management of Stress
- Review/Example Scenario (as time permits)
- Q/A
Swedish at Skyline High School

- Started in ISD high schools in 2013
- As of 2020, all middle schools and extended elementary coverage added
- Swedish has been running school based health centers since early 2000’s.
- Ballard High School, Woodinville High School, and ISD schools represented.
School Based Mental Health Model

*Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*

**Tier 1:** Core Interventions (all students) – District/Building-Level Program & Policy
- Social/emotional learning curricula
- Bullying prevention programs
- Drug/alcohol education
- Trauma-informed discipline policy
- Core instruction, behavioral expectations, positive support and consequences

**Tier 2:** Targeted Interventions – School-Based Mental Health
- Moderate intensity
- Shorter term
- Additional support, behavior change strategies

**Tier 3:** Intensive Interventions – Community Mental Health Services
- Higher intensity
- Longer duration
- Individualized behavior support plans
Services

- **What?:** Help students with stress, anxiety, depression, relationship challenges, social issues, grief and loss, identity and self-confidence, and coordination with outside resources.

- **Why?:** Students whose mental health needs are met do better in school!

- **Who?:** Me! I am a licensed independent clinical social worker (LICSW) and have been with Swedish since 2006. 8 years at the First Hill campus of SMC primarily working pediatric and obstetrics. Started at SHS in 2015.

- **Where?:** Office inside the Counseling Center.

- **How?:** Appointment requests via email or request slips located with the counseling secretary. Discuss referrals with school counselors.
Disclaimer

- This is not a presentation on anxiety!
- Stress and anxiety are often used interchangeably, and when at tolerable levels, are natural and normal.
- Anxiety impacting multiple areas of life over a prolonged amount of time can lead to a mental health diagnosis.
Language of Stress

Definitions

- **Stressor**: an event that triggers the stress response in your body - can be an internal event (like a thought) or external (like a social interaction, sound, chemical, etc).

- **Stress Response**: your body’s signal that you need to adapt and change in order to accommodate or deal with the stressor. This signal includes your heart racing, palms sweating, shortness of breath, butterflies in your stomach, and more.
## Different Types of Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
<td>Daily, sometimes multiple times a day</td>
<td>Situations can be positive or negative</td>
<td>Helps us learn to adapt and grow</td>
<td>Taking a test, giving a presentation, calling someone you don’t know, making the school team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerable</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
<td>Multiple times through your life</td>
<td>Involves situations where there is more serious impact</td>
<td>As long as you have supportive relationships around, is unlikely to have any lasting negative consequences</td>
<td>Someone dying, parents’ divorce, mid year school move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxic</td>
<td>Prolonged</td>
<td>Rare, many will go their entire lives without experiencing toxic stress</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Can have negative consequences if proper help is not provided</td>
<td>Abuse, neglect, violence, natural disasters, extreme poverty, assault</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Toxic stress is the only type of stress that’s actually bad for you.

Experiencing positive or tolerable stress actually makes us stronger, healthier and more understanding human beings!
This doesn’t mean that stress feels “good!”
Understanding the Stress Response

Stressor

↓

Stress Response

↓

Consider it as a positive signal used to alert to solve a problem, focus on developing strategies to solve the problem, plus use positive stress reduction techniques (e.g., Box Breathing Exercise) to decrease the intensity.

↓

New skills learned

↓

Resilience

“I can do it”

↓

Dependency

“I can’t do it”

Consider it as a negative signal to either be avoided or only to focus on decreasing the intensity.

↓

New skills not learned
Understanding the Stress Response

► How to make stress your friend!

Kelly McGonigal

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVT AoXEU
So How Does This Relate to Performance and Achievement?
Understanding the Stress Response

1. NORMAL stress response (physical, cognitive, emotional)

2. What happens to the stress response if a person AVOIDS the situation at point A. Next time the stressor occurs the response is MORE severe.

3. What happens to the stress response if a person uses their experience of stress to arrive at a SOLUTION at point B. Next time the stressor occurs the response is LESS severe.
Stress and Performance/Achievement

The Yerkes-Dodson Law
How anxiety affects performance.

Optimal arousal and optimal performance

Increasing attention and interest

Impaired performance because of strong anxiety

SOURCE: ROBERT M. YERKES AND JOHN D. DODSON

© HBR.ORG
So What Can We Do?

Dealing with Stress in a Healthy Way
In a nutshell: Model or Teach/Practice Effective Coping

- This includes problem solving, using social support, making healthy choices about food, exercise, sleep, doing things you enjoy, etc.

- Figure out how to share the problem(s) causing the stress response. Make a plan—create steps and do one step at a time. Challenge your assumptions. Avoid using all or nothing reasoning. Ask someone for help.

- Apply your solutions to the problem

- **Goal**: Manage stress response to optimal level for performance while also creating resiliency.
Steps to Change How We Think and Use Language About Stress:

*Language and Interpretation*

- When you experience the *stress response*, make sure you use the right words to describe it. Use the phrase “*stress response*.” Do not use “anxiety,” “stress,” “depression,” “stressed out,” etc.

- Interpret the stress response as positive. For example, “my body and brain are getting ready to take on an important task,” or “I am getting a signal telling me to get ready.”
Steps to Change How We Think and Use Language About Stress: 

*Cause and Solutions*

- Figure out what is causing the stress response.
- Identifying the problem is an important step in developing a solution. For example, “Why am I feeling the stress response?” or “What is happening in my life that is leading to the stress response?” or “What’s really bugging me about this?”
- Consider the solutions—what are they? Even a difficult problem with a difficult solution is still the best coping strategy.
- Ask for help!!
Steps to Change How We Think and Use Language About Stress:
Acceptance and Reality

- Accept what you can’t change. If there isn’t a solution and you can’t change the situation, you may need to move on.
- Be realistic. Try and put things in perspective, knowing not every stressor is the end of the world. How might you feel about it in a week, or month, or year? What would you tell a friend in the same situation?
Steps to Change How We Think and Use Language About Stress:

**Acknowledgement**

- Acknowledge your feelings. This stinks!
- It’s ok to feel angry or upset once in a while. Bottling this up will not help the situation.
- Move from experiencing how it makes you feel, to how you can solve it or meet the next challenge.
WHAT DO I DO WHEN I’M TOO OVERWHELMED IN THE MOMENT TO WORK THE STEPS?
Use Stress Reduction/Relaxation—but *Sparingly*!

- These techniques may be useful for some people to help calm themselves but they do nothing to solve the problem causing the stress response.
- They should be used when a person feels so overwhelmed that they cannot effectively apply problem solving/coping strategies.
- Over-reliance on stress reduction techniques without changing the way we think can be harmful.
Modulating the Intensity of the Stress Response - Examples

- **Breathe like a Navy Seal**
  
  https://gearpatrol.com/2017/02/02/box-breathing-navy-seals/

- **Box Breathing**

  **Box Breathing**
  One useful technique to help with dealing with stress is Box Breathing. It takes about 15 minutes to learn and once mastered can be applied unobtrusively and quietly – ideal for a classroom situation. This technique is described below. Before beginning the How Do You Cope exercise would be a good time to teach the students Box Breathing.

  Box Breathing can help your heart rate return to normal, which helps you to relax. Here’s how you do it: If possible, sit and close your eyes. If not, just focus on your breathing.

  **Step 1:** Inhale your breath (preferably through your nose) for 4 seconds.
  **Step 2:** Hold your breath for 4 seconds. You’re not trying to deprive yourself of air; you’re just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs.
  **Step 3:** Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds.
  **Step 4:** Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing again.

  Repeat this process as many times as you can. Even 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed and in control.
Modulating the Intensity of the Stress Response - Examples

- Focus on Your Hands
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation/Tense and Release
- Body Scan
- Grounding Tool - 5 Senses
  - 5 things you can see
  - 4 things you can feel or touch (air in nose, feet on floor)
  - 3 things you can hear
  - 2 things you can smell (or 2 smells you like)
  - 1 thing you can taste (or like the taste of)
In Review: How to manage our stress response

At each degree of stress (1-3), focus on the following strategies:

1: Identify this stress as a positive signal leading us to prepare to adapt and change, as the stress response has intended.

2: Determine the problem and develop solutions for solving it. You’re left with a new skill that you can use in the future and have proved your ability to adapt.

3: Manage the intensity of your stress response. Breath work, grounding, take a walk, etc. Return to steps 1 or 2.
Example Scenario (if time permits)

- **Stressor**: I forgot to turn in my assignment, there are so few points in that class right now, it really dropped my grade.

- **Stress response**: Rapid heart beat, crying, irritable, lashed out at my sister.
Example Scenario: Working the steps

- **Language/interpretation:** “Okay self, I’m having a stress response. My grades are important to me, and I need to take action. “ (Do I need a stress reduction technique first?)

- **Cause/solutions?** “I have too many things going on (distractions too?). I need to talk to my teacher, and need support, and figure how I can remedy this.”

- **Acceptance/reality:** “However it happened, I managed to get to this point. I need to look at my time management to avoid this in the future.”

- **Acknowledgment:** “This sucks, I don’t know how it’s going to turn out. I know I can handle it and won’t care next week but this still stinks. Where’s the ice cream?”

- **Outcome Goal:** “I problem-solved, took action, and whether I got the points or not, I learned that I can advocate for myself and get thru it.”
QUESTIONS?

Summer Igaz, MSW, LICSW
IgazS@Issaquah.wednet.edu
**Resources**

- **CRISIS TEXT LINE - 741741**
- TeenLink 1-866-TEENLINK (833-6546)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Trevor Project 1-866-4UTREVOR (specific toward LGBTQ youth)
- Teen Mental Health [teenmentalhealth.org](http://teenmentalhealth.org)
- JED Foundation [jedfoundation.org](http://jedfoundation.org)
- Seize the Awkward [seizetheawkward.org](http://seizetheawkward.org)
- Press Pause [presspause.halfofus.com](http://presspause.halfofus.com)
- Project Semicolon [projectsemicolon.com](http://projectsemicolon.com)
- Now Matters Now [nowmattersnow.org](http://nowmattersnow.org)