

Teaching Stress Relief to Students

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As teachers and parents, we all know that the world around us has changed dramatically since we were growing up. The threats to our physical and emotional safety are all around us, in our communities and in the media on a daily basis. Teaching stress relief certainly was not something that was focused on even 10 years ago in many places. Helping children learn skills like progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and deep breathing can help them establish useful habits that last a lifetime.

What is stress?

Stress is a combination of physical and emotional feelings that can make us feel jumpy and nervous, worried and upset. It causes physical changes and can impact behavior in both negative and positive ways. When talking to kids about their own personal stress, discussing examples of ways they experience stress helps them identify how it impacts them. Some examples might include: academics, not being attractive, not fitting in, not being liked, disappointing parents, problems with friends, family difficulties, and losses. Sometimes, just having a safe place to share concerns helps relieve stress. There should also be limits on focusing on the stress, so setting a “time limit for worry” is also important.

Some history of stress

Early in the 20th century, researcher Walter Cannon developed the “fight or flight” theory. This states that our natural response to threats is to either fight or run away from danger. Hence, our response to stress and anxiety serves a purpose if there really is a stressful event occurring. Some of the physical responses are:

Heart racing	Shortness of breath	Butterflies/nausea
Trembling/shaking	Jumpiness	Fear of embarrassment
Wobbliness in legs	Sweating	Tightness in chest
Hearing and vision become more acute		
Hands and feet get cold - blood is directed to large muscles to prepare for fight/flight		

Hans Seyle popularized the concept of stress in the 1950's. His theory was that all individuals respond to threatening situations similarly and that stress causes chemical changes in the body. The chemical, Adrenalin, is released and focuses the body on immediate self-preservation. Some stresses are sudden and are relieved quickly, while others, like family problems and school/social difficulties can make your body and mind tired if these responses continue over a longer period of time.

If you are able to, in the middle of a conversation about stress, loudly slam a book on the desk with no warning. This provides an opportunity for students to experience a quick physical reaction to stress. Then you can discuss the common physical reactions to stress as well as how they might feel if these physical reactions lasted for several days. This illustrates how long-term physical stress can negatively impact the body.

Our response to threats and stress allows us to protect ourselves from danger. Our response to stress can become a problem when we react physically or emotionally to things that are not dangerous to us or if we allow our fear of stressful situations to change our behavior in negative ways. For example, if a stressor of students is about fitting in or embarrassing themselves in public and this stress leads them to stay isolated, problems occur.

Following is an activity you may consider using to illustrate how students' thoughts affect their stress level and stress also affects their thoughts.

Find a partner.

One partner stands with palms facing up, other partner tries to push hands down. Notice the resistance.

Next, partner with palms up think negative thoughts such as: I am weak, I cannot resist the other person's pressure, I am not strong enough. Notice resistance.

Finally, partner with palms up, think positive thoughts such as: I am strong, I am able to resist pressure, I am capable and confident. Notice resistance.

Discuss if/how thoughts affected student's ability to resist pressure.

Ask the student's questions such as: Think about the last stressful situation you were in. What do you think about? How do you talk to yourself? Did you see things as hopeless? Does it seem like the end of the world? Does your fear get in the way of doing what you need to do?

The physical reactions and thoughts you have influence how you respond to stress. You can change how your body responds to stress and you can change your thoughts so the negative impact of stress is minimal. This also creates a sense of control, which is helpful since we often feel helpless when under stress.

There is a handout available for use after this article to help students think more specifically about what they tell themselves in stressful situations and how they can change those thoughts in order to decrease stress. Feel free to use it as you see fit.

Teaching relaxation and imagery

Depending on the age of your students, they may or may not be familiar with techniques that are proven to decrease stress and increase productivity. Actually walking them through relaxation exercises is the best way to teach them stress relief. The more they practice the techniques, the more useful they become, even outside of the school setting. Below are some facts about these processes that students may not know.

- Relaxation is a tool that you can use in a way that best helps you. Usually, I recommend that people use a good progressive muscle relaxation or imagery tape/CD 1-2 times per day for 2 weeks. The idea is to learn the process so well that you become able to relax your muscles on your own whenever you feel stress coming on.
- You will recognize where in your body you most feel the tension and can use the techniques that best help you.
- Research shows that chemical changes occur in the body in reaction to stress and also in response to relaxation and imagery. Vividly imagining an event can produce physiological effects similar to actually experiencing the event itself. Athletes use

imagery to increase their ability to achieve their goal. They imagine themselves successfully performing a specific task.

- Progressive muscle relaxation helps you learn to relax your muscles. As you practice and become better at it, you can tell your body that the perceived danger is over and that your body can return to normal.
- The process may seem weird at first. It may help to tell students to think of imagery/visualization as similar to when they are reading and see pictures in their head while thinking about the events of a story.
- Don't worry about what others in the classroom are doing, just keep your eyes closed.
- Get in comfortable, sitting position. Lying down usually leads you to fall asleep!

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR is a skill that uses focus on breathing deeply while tensing and relaxing muscle groups. The purpose is to notice the difference between the tension in the body and true relaxation. In doing this, people begin to notice when and where they are tense and with practice, are able to quickly reduce physical tension that can increase stress.

The process usually begins with breathing from the diaphragm and beginning with the top of the body, asks people to tense muscle groups one at a time for 10 seconds and then coaches them to relax the muscles as much as possible. It can be a relatively easy skill to learn and can effectively reduce the physical impact of stress.

Guided Imagery and Visualization

Guided imagery involves helping people slow down and visualize themselves in situations that are calming, comforting, and peaceful. The overall feeling centers on strength, courage and facing fears. It allows people to see themselves in positive ways and to slow down in a fast-paced world. It can clear their minds and relieve tension. At its best, visualization can encourage people that they are capable of accomplishing what they see in their visualization.

When taught and practiced correctly, these techniques can put into place a set of skills that will help children take more control of their reactions to stress. It will encourage them to respond effectively to the inevitable stresses that will come their way in life. PMR and guided imagery/visualization exercises are available at Doll and Associates. Our therapists are also available to come to the classroom or to work with teachers to present information regarding these techniques. A PMR CD is also available.

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