# **Chapter 8: Activities**

## **Promoting Positive Mental Health**

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## Learning Goals

* Be able to identify and distinguish between positive, tolerable, and toxic stress.
* Understand what you can do to create a mentally healthy classroom.
* Select a strategy or tool that you can use to help your students cope with stress.
* Create ready-made activities to implement in your classroom to help students learn to identify and cope with everyday stress.

## Resources

* Center on the Developing Child: Harvard University (https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/)
* Teach Resiliency (www.teachresiliency.ca)

## Setup

Stress is a normal, natural part of life and a necessary component of motivation and healthy adaptation to challenges. Often, however, we see stress as a negative or as something to be avoided. Granted, there are conditions in which stress becomes overwhelming, such as when a child or youth with a history of maltreatment (child abuse) has learned that he or she cannot escape a dangerous situation. At the same time, it is critically important that we help children and youth build a history of success in the face of stress so that they can develop a sense of self-efficacy—that is, a sense that they are capable of doing things effectively. If we understand the concept of stress across the spectrum, and how to help children and youth cope with stress successfully, then they will be able to face new challenges with a feeling that they are capable of achieving positive outcomes. Children and youth who take risks—such as guessing when they don’t know the answer to a test question, “leaving it all on the field,” and reaching out to make new friends or repair relationships that have been disrupted by anger or hurt—tend to develop self-confidence and a sense of mastery over their decisions and outcomes.

# Instruction 1: Ideas for Teachers to Bring to the Classroom

With your class, make posters (to display in the classroom or for students to keep in their binders) that present tips, strategies, and resources such as the following:

* Kids Help Phone: This is Canada’s national, free hotline for children and youth, which offers free phone counselling, live online chats, and many other resources. Find out more at http://kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/Home.aspx.
* What’s your plan? List three things you can do to focus, be calm, and stay present.
* Draw your own circle of support and list the people you can talk to when you are in need; focus on categories, such as family, friends, church members, and teammates.

Establish a regular routine in which you lead the class in a daily or weekly check-in. Here is a simple one to do with your students:

* We are going to take a few minutes to check in with ourselves, to think about and acknowledge how we are feeling today. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 meaning you’re on top of the world), rate how you are feeling right now.
* Now let’s do a deep breathing exercise. Take slow, deliberate breaths by inhaling through your nose for a count of four, then exhaling through your mouth for a count of six. We will do this for one minute.
* Now rate your mood again.
* You don’t have to share your numbers with anyone. But if you feel particularly low today, I’m available (between classes, at lunch, after class) if you would like to talk.

# Instruction 2: Building Your Learning and Skills

* Go to the website for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, read about the different types of stress, and watch the video available there about how toxic stress affects the developing brain.
* Next, go to the website for TeachResiliency, which offers resources (built in partnership with teachers) for both teachers and students.

1. On the site, enter the word *stress* into the search box.
2. Use the Refine Search option to filter the search by selecting “Supporting/working with students” and “Student materials.”
3. View the resources available and select one that matches the age group of your students or is relevant to all age groups.
4. Select one idea or tool to use with your students.

***Variations and Differentiation***

* Try using different search filters—for example, searching for podcasts, infographics, or videos.
* Focus on strategies that not only help students who face learning challenges related to high stress but also help all students learn to manage their stress more effectively. By focusing on creating a mentally healthy classroom, you can build a learning environment that welcomes, includes, and support all students.

***Assessment Look-Fors***

* Look for strategies and tools that build resilience to stress in small and manageable steps.
* Think about what you do in your classroom that creates needless or potentially harmful stress for students. Examples include assignments or learning products that are too heavily weighted, which can leave students feeling extraordinary pressure to do well; asking students to perform or demonstrate a skill or knowledge in front of the whole class when the same thing could be done in a smaller group; and publicly rank-ordering students based on performance, which can leave some students feeling shame.

***Safety***

If you decide to talk with your class about stress, recognize that when we bring a mental health topic into the open, students’ responses will be influenced by their previous experiences (e.g., maltreatment, bullying, living with anxiety or low self-esteem). Thus the following safety tips are helpful whenever we prepare to bring mental health into the classroom:

* Give your school leaders (principal, vice principal, learning resource teacher) advance notice that you will be talking about mental health topics in the class.
* If your school has a mental health counselor or other appropriate resource person, ask that person to join you in your preparation and teaching as a support, or even as a co-instructor if possible. Getting to meet this person helps students reach out if they need support in the future.
* Prepare any discussion of mental health with the knowledge that you do have students in your classroom who struggle with adverse childhood experiences (e.g., maltreatment, poverty, violence, or having a parent or caregiver with a mental illness). With this reality in mind, take care to present materials, resources, and strategies in ways that strengthen and bolster—rather than isolate and target—children who may be struggling. For example, choose images and language carefully and teach to the most vulnerable child in the classroom (even though you may not know who that child is).
* Sometimes a student will disclose to you that he or she feels very stressed, or that his or her family is very stressed, and ask you to keep it a secret or promise not to tell anyone. In such cases, gently but firmly tell the student that his or her safety is your top priority and that you will tell someone if necessary based on your concern for the student’s safety. Remember that you are surrounded by support in the form of your school leaders, teacher colleagues, school support teams, and child welfare authorities. Reach out, ask for help, and remember that meeting the needs of all students requires collaboration, teamwork, and, above all, teachers who are committed to their students’ well-being.