

STOP THE STRESS IN SCHOOLS

Mental health strategies teachers can use to build
a kinder gentler classroom

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Introduction

I'm Ella. I am 8 years old. I love rabbits and horses. And I love to play with my Dad and my brother and sister. I DON'T love school. This story is about how I am learning to feel more confident and less nervous about going to school. I don't like school. And I will tell you why. The day feels so l-o-n-g. Seven hours feel like a million years to me. I feel like my teacher yells at me all the time when I am too slow at math. And I don't know who to play with at recess. Being at school feels so hard to me even though I know to some kids it is as easy as eating a piece of cake.

Ella is the eight-year-old daughter of someone I know. She had a lot of difficult feelings, but was unsure why she had them and what she was feeling.

Every morning I wake up and I feel very nervous about going to school. My belly rumbles and hurts. My head feels heavy. When my mom drives me to school, getting out of the car is the hardest part of all. She walks me to the door and then I start to cry. I can't think of anything aside from how nervous I feel. With my mom leaving me, I feel lost.

Ella's body is sending her warning messages; these messages make her feel powerless and incapable. Ella went to see a thinking coach who supports children's understanding of their thoughts and feelings. With the thinking coach, Ella was better able to understand what her body's aches were telling her and what she could do about them.

My mom took me to see a thinking coach. She understands what I am feeling. She is trying to help me think differently about what I am thinking.

With support, Ella learned to identify her worries and the way they made her body feel. She learned to change the way she thought and reacted to her worries.

Last year was different. Last year my teacher was l-o-v-e-l-y. Her voice was soft and warm. She made me feel special and loved. Last year I was confident. My teacher this year wants me to be "more independent." "You are a big girl," she keeps telling me in a stern voice. She yells a lot. At me!

We have a huge role to play in the lives of students like Ella. We can support them and help them respond differently to the world around them. But the first change in response might have to come from us, in our responses to children like Ella.

What does Ella need to be successful? What can we do as a school system to help Ella get to school? What can I do as an educator to help Ella develop into the best version of herself? What skills and self-calming strategies can I teach Ella so that she can feel differently about school? How can I help her be more resilient and optimistic as she faces a world of ever-increasing challenges?

What did Ella really need in order to get to school and feel confident and ready to learn? She needed a kind and calm teacher. She needed someone who loved, supported, and believed in her, someone who was soft and gentle. In my book *Moment-to-Moment*, I write “the most influential commodity a teacher brings to the classroom is his or her own positive personal qualities and warm character in the face of a challenging situation.” It seems that as long as we keep reminding ourselves of that one commodity we can give children what they really need—our positive support.

If we want to provide safe and caring school communities, if we want positive emotional climates in our schools that reduce stress on children, professional development should centre on helping teachers maintain their positive personal qualities and warm character in the face of stress. It is often the case that teachers are kind and gentle most of the time, yet when under stress (and teaching is a stressful job) they can lose those kind and gentle qualities. They sometimes turn to reactive—aggressive, critical, harsh—strategies. And it is important to note that reactive and aggressive strategies are often successful in the short term. For both teachers and students, these reactions often work. Loud, harsh, disruptive, violent aggression gives anyone an immediate voice. People stop; people listen; people react and move in. You are not being listened to when you are not being heard; if you yell, if you break down, if you cry or scream, people respond to your needs. Children listen to the screaming teacher and teachers attend to the aggressive child. But these strategies are contrary to the skills we want to teach our students.

Teachers need support in developing a process that creates a kind and gentle classroom, one they can sustain even during the hard moments. They need the skills to remain calm in the face of their increasingly demanding and stressful role as educators, counselors, and mentors; the skills to protect themselves from burnout and disillusion in a job that seems to consistently demand more and more of them. We need to encourage teachers to support each other as much as they support their students, so that teachers are working in a kind and gentle environment as much as they are teaching in one.

The Stress Effect

Stress is a natural reaction to threats in the environment. Our bodies are programmed to seek out danger in the environment and to respond in self-preservation. Perceived threats to our survival—dangerous animals, enemies, violent weather—trigger a fear response. In today’s classroom, the trigger can be a math test, an annoying noise, or worrying that you have hurt someone’s feelings. If these fear responses are being sensed regularly, they can cause physical and cognitive disruption.

The part of our brains involved in stress is the amygdala, with its primary role in processing our emotional reactions. The amygdala stores memories associated with emotional events and senses warnings throughout the body that there is danger in the environment. When danger is sensed, the amygdala sends stress hormones to prepare the body to face the danger, run from it, or remain perfectly still. In this state of Fight, Flight, or Freeze, all the body's resources are available for survival as it moves into a ready-to-react state: increased heart rate and perspiration; eyes open to seek danger.

The Fight, Flight, or Freeze reaction is functional when there is real danger (e.g., fire or tigers), since the person needs to respond quickly and efficiently. A Fight, Flight, or Freeze reaction to daily stresses is not functional and reduces a person's ongoing capacity to problem-solve and learn.

When the body is in a state of Fight, Flight, or Freeze, its cognitive capacity is shut down. Pathways to the neocortex—the part of the brain responsible for rational thought, impulse control, and assessment of consequences—shut off to conserve energy for reaction and protection. For students, school functioning occurs in the neocortex. When pathways to the neocortex shut down, the logic, impulse control, problem-solving, and language abilities of the brain either do not work or do not work as well.

Stress triggers in the environment cause internal feelings of discomfort, but everyone has different behavioral reactions to these triggers. Some people use the charged-up internal energy to jump in, get everything done, take over, control, plan, organize, and execute a task; others pull away from the task, not sure where to begin.

Triggers are not always innately negative. They can be objects or events that are positive and exciting. Students might become so involved in an activity that their bodies become overstimulated and send distress warnings. Children can experience sensory overload to positive events and enjoyable environments. Or students can want something so much (e.g., a cookie or a video game) that they become worried by thinking they will not get it, jealous that someone else's will be better, or angry because they think someone else will get more.

It is easiest to view stress in three levels—high, medium, and low—or as three stages on a Stress Curve (see page 8), on which the upward arc reflects the increase in stress we experience as we move from a state of low to high stress.

- Low-stress environments expose individuals to small, age-appropriate triggers that are manageable. The person faces the trigger (e.g., a task or activity), manages it, and experiences success with it. Success does not necessarily mean that the person accomplished the task perfectly, but that the task was undertaken and there was some positive closure to the event.
- Medium stress is experienced by an individual facing a trigger or multiple triggers that start to demand more skills and abilities than he/she might have. The person begins to use a lot of energy to handle and manage tasks or triggers, and this begins to deplete his/her internal resources.
- Levels of high stress exist when there is one large trigger or multiple smaller triggers that demand more of an individual than he/she has the skills to manage. High stress and prolonged periods of medium stress begin to affect a person through a depletion of physical and mental resources in the person's attempt to deal with and manage stress.

SAMPLE LIST

Things that Upset Me
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When someone bites her nails.• When someone taps his desk.• When someone leans into me.• When I do all the work for a group project.• When we have indoor recess.• When someone repeats the same story over and over again.• When gym class is cancelled.• When someone plays the wrong note in music class.• When someone does not know the rules of our game.• When the computer is slow or it does not work.

Set Goals

Students need to work on being aware that everyone in the class has different strengths and challenges and that they must often work together. They must realize that, while working in the groups, they might have variances in their abilities to accomplish certain tasks; sometimes students will work with someone who can do something more easily than they can, and other times they will work with someone who cannot do things as well as they can.

Regulate

When a student becomes upset by the behaviors of others, try not to rush in and problem-solve. Encourage a self-calming strategy; for example, have the students take a step away from each other.

Engage

Be available to a student who is struggling with the challenges of another student. It is not fair to students to dismiss their problems by telling them that it is rude to complain about the struggles of another student or that they need to let it go. Allow students who struggle with the challenging behavior of other students an outlet to express themselves and to feel heard. Sit and listen or provide the student with a writing journal.

Support

Support students in being aware of the strengths and challenges of others without making comments and hurting the feelings of other students in their class. Students need consistent examples of what they can think inside their heads but should not say out loud. Use a self-reflection chart for students who struggle with knowing what they can say out loud and what they should keep inside their heads (see Say It/Don't Say It template on page 44). Students who need some guidance with interaction can complete charts and then use them as reference during group work.