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Professional Development Webinar Transcription

Part I: Understanding Student Stress

Introduction

Webinar: 0:00-1:28

PowerPoint Slides: 1-3

Hello, welcome. I am so pleased to have this opportunity to do this presentation to you on understanding and responding effectively to student stress. I am Nancy Heath. I am a professor in educational and counseling psychology at McGill University. However, I am also a parent of two young adults who themselves went through a very demanding and stressful school experience. In addition to that, I have worked with schools for over 25 years addressing issues of stress related mental health, and I have found there are certain strategies and certain core understanding that can make all the difference to how our students do. I am an educator and I am a parent, but I am here to tell you how you can really make a difference for your students day-by-day.

Right now, we are going to focus on the first part of this two-part series, and it hones in on understanding and identifying student stress. In this presentation, I want to emphasize the following aspects: the background, prevalence and causes of stress, understanding stress, identifying stress, and concluding comments.

Why Talk About Stress?

Webinar: 1:29-3:29

PowerPoint Slides: 4-6

Stress is something we experience day-to-day. How many of us have commonly said, "I'm stressed. This is so stressful." How often do we hear our students talking about stress moment-by-moment through their day? If it is such a normal part of being human, why do we need to address it and respond to this in our students?

Well, the reason we need to do that is because, as we know, academic stress is associated with depression and suicidal ideation here in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Specifically, within this context, we know that academic stress has been found to be very tied to academic pressure and academic stress

where academic results are perceived as determining the students' futures. This leads to a very competitive environment that increases the student's academic stress.

But is this so different in other contexts? Is it unique to Hong Kong? Well, in fact, if we look at the prevalence of stress, the fact that in Hong Kong one in three students report suffering from stress, anxiety, or depression, is not that different to what we see in North America, where we also see one in three youth reporting moderate to severe stress.

However, in Hong Kong, we see about 40% (38.7%) of young people reporting moderate to severe, or extreme, anxiety. This is very concerning especially because, across all contexts, we see that youth stress is increasing both in young people and in their parents. Sure enough, here in Hong Kong, in the last five years, we have seen a noticeable increase in student stress.

Causes of Stress

Webinar: 3:30-6:36

PowerPoint Slides: 7-8

So, what are the causes of this rise? Why is it increasing to this degree? Well, the causes of stress are fairly solid and they have remained pretty much the same because, of course, they are what contributes to the experience of stress.

The first one that is not so subject to change is the genetic or temperamental disposition of the child. We really cannot do as much with that, but we need to recognize it because the family can also contribute to stress, and temperament and genetics run in the family.

Performance stress has always been a source of stress through the generations. Similarly, peer or social stress is very much a cause of experience stress. Family, relationships, divorce, difficulties in the family, sibling issues, as well as family expectations. Finally, world events have always been a source of stress for young people and adult.

However, why is it different? Why is it more now? Performance in the current complex world it is more competitive for young people today than 20 or 30 years ago. In terms of the peers, they are more connected because of the internet and because of social media. It means that if they have stress in their school context that goes through all of their context. They cannot go home, be with family, or be in extra-curricular and get away from the stresses they are experiencing in school; through social media, that follows them everywhere they go.

Furthermore, the family itself is more stressed. I am sure I do not have to tell you this, as you have families and know that day-to-day you are experiencing a lot of stress when you go home, and this impacts your children. The world events are still stressful, but now, with the internet and globalization, young people now are much more aware, and parents cannot shield their young people from these experiences. They are more graphic: what they are exposed to is very, very intense, and globalization makes them feel they are competing not only within their community or neighborhood, but at a global level, which is extremely stressful.

In Hong Kong specifically, does the research bear this out or is it different here? No, indeed, we see the exact same causes and sources of stress here in Hong Kong. The proportion is somewhat different in that you can see the academic performance and parental expectations are extremely high as a source of stress. This is not a surprise to us. However, in North America or western contexts, academic performance and parental expectations usually come in at about 30% to 35% as a source of stress for high school students. So, clearly, the environment is more competitive and there is more demand here.

Understanding Stress

Webinar: 6:37-10:01

PowerPoint Slides: 9-13

If these are all contributors of stress, how is that so if stress is in the individual, within the person? Well, what we know is as much as it is within the student, and the strategies we will be talking about in Part II really address the support of those students own ability to cope, we cannot stop there, because stress goes beyond the individual. The contributors really come from the family; from the community; from the institutions, such as the schools; from the parent work places; as well as social and cultural values. When our students are indicating extremely levels of high stress, we have to question not just giving them more coping strategies but really question the contexts that they are embedded in, the contribution that this is making to their stress level, and how we can address it at that level: at a system level.

But what is stress? How can we understand what stress is, and why is it important to understand what stress is? We generally think that stress occurs in the environment: our students think the exam is stressful. The assignment is stressful. What is going on at home is stressful.

In fact, stress is an internal experience that we have when we perceive the demands of the situation as being more than we can cope with. Stress is not out there, stress is within us.

If we take the example of a student who is studying for an exam and we tell them an exam or difficult assignment is coming up. We are told that, and we have a certain initial stress about, "What does this entail?" "What does this mean for me?" "What is the impact for me?"

Then, once the student starts to study and prepare for this, they may feel even greater stress because they start thinking certain thoughts; "I'm going to fail," "If I don't do well on this, my parents will be so disappointed in me," or, "I won't get into university, and my future will be completely ruined." These thoughts are actually what causes the stress. The stress is not in the exam or the assignment: it is in the thoughts that are engendered by that exam.

We can intervene in three different places: in the demands of the situation or exam, within the individual to decrease their reaction to stress, and once the stress is existing in the individual to try to calm that stress response down. As much as we almost always think, and students absolutely think, that, "When do you intervene with stress?" When I am feeling it. When I am feeling the stress. No, no, that is a key part, but we need to really address stress before, during, and after. How do we do that? By regulating emotions more effectively, because stress is emotionally driven.

Emotional Regulation

Webinar: 10:02-11:04

PowerPoint Slide: 14

What is emotion regulation? Emotion regulation is a term that we use to describe the process by which we manage the experience and expression of our emotions, which most of us have a good sense of.

What isn't always understood is emotion regulation has three parts: reactivity (How many things upset me? How many different things? Some people get upset about many different things; others only occasionally.), intensity (Perhaps I only get upset occasionally, but when I do feel it, I feel it extremely intensely.), or, the third part, recovery or persistence (Perhaps I'm not that reactive and I don't feel it intensely, but it lasts and lasts so that I can't sleep. It persists sometimes for days.) All three parts need to be managed effectively.

Good Versus Bad Stress

Webinar: 11:05-11:31

PowerPoint Slides: 15-16

Is stress always bad? Do we always need to decrease stress? No, absolutely. Although we often think of stress as bad, it is tremendously adaptive. Our brains are hard-wired to have a stress response to tell us that there is potential danger. From an evolutionary standpoint, it is extremely adaptive. The stress response triggers the fight or flight response, and, from an evolutionary perspective, the individual who felt that strongly and took off lasted the longest. So, it is not a bad thing: it's an incredibly positive indicator that there's something that is a threat or perceived threat.

However, whether the threat is real (saber tooth tiger) or perceived ("I can't do this assignment"), the physiological response still occurs in the same way in the body. It is not in the student's head. It is in the student's body and the interpretation of that feeling in their body is the stress response.

So, stress: if it is not always bad, is it good? Is there such a thing as good stress? Absolutely. Good versus bad stress. If you have too little stress, I mean, who can imagine such a thing? Too little stress? If you have too little stress, that actually can lead to depression as well. When does that happen? If you think of an elderly person who does not have many demands in their life, and they are not having a lot of stimulation or demands, it can lead to depression and withdrawal.

In fact, what you want is you want an optimal level of stress, which is really at the point where students are challenged but feel they can cope. Now, the problem is, we are not always, as educators or parents, and certainly not as students, very good at understanding where we are on this continuum of performance, optimal performance, and optimal levels of stress. Sometimes the exhaustion level can look like it is relaxed, and the tendency as a parent or an educator is to push that student to get them motivated. What we are really doing is pushing them into exhaustion, as we will talk about a little later.

Identifying Stress

Webinar: 11:32-16:27

PowerPoint Slides: 15-20

Why is this important? It is important because we have to know how to identify the stress overload that you can see in red there. When you have that stress overload, you need to back off.

So, in terms of identifying stress, how do we as educators identify stress in students? The key thing is to listen to the students. Specifically, what we will notice is we tend to think, and students tend to think, "How do you feel stress? It's an emotional thing." Right? Sure. It's nervousness, oversensitivity, irritability, maybe even I'm a little short tempered.

These signs of stress go far beyond the emotional. They are psychological or cognitive. It impacts students cognitively through rumination (thinking obsessively about how hard this is or how they cannot cope), poor problem solving (they cannot think clearly, which leads to hopelessness because, "I cannot see a way out of doing this situation that I feel I cannot cope with") or catastrophizing (as I mentioned earlier, thinking, "This means my future is over"). Beyond emotional, cognitive, or psychological, we have physical symptoms. The students who have headaches all the time, fatigue, stomachaches, muscle tension. Finally, there are behavioral signs where students make very poor choices, have difficulty sleeping, or have a change in eating habits. We will talk about that in a minute.

What we suggest is sharing this stress profile with your students. We will have this in our resource section at the end of the video. This way, a student can go through and have a better understanding of how they may have physical, emotional, or behavioral stress. Generally, a student tends to experience their stress in one or two areas. If it has gone to all three, they are probably getting into stress overload.

The important thing for us educators to keep in mind is that student stress does not always look like student stress. It may be that the student seems as if they are tired or non-responsive, or "lazy," appear to not care, or be angry and non-compliant.

It is important that we do not try to ramp up the stress. That is never effective in motivating a student. Although many of us as parents think that if only we can persuade them how important this exam is, they will do better. Not so. Instead, we need to make them feel that this situation is something they can succeed at to give them the skills and the belief that they can manage this challenge.

When Is Stress Too Much?

Webinar: 16:28-19:10

PowerPoint Slides: 21-23

How do we know when stress overload is really occurring in students? Well, students who say that the stress is there and it comes and goes for no apparent reason. Not just before an exam or something that anyone can identify as a clearly stressful period, but it is coming and going with no clear reason. That

they feel unable to cope with this. If a student voices this, we cannot dismiss it. It really is an indication that there is something wrong. They cannot seem to relax, they feel tense most of the time, and they feel a general loss of control.

Ultimately, what is the deciding factor for when we know students are in trouble with their stress? Really, the litmus test is when it interferes with day-to-day functioning. Because at that point, we know that this is truly in the overload to burn out range.

When you have stress overload, what does that mean? It means that you are very likely to be seeing anxiety and depression, because those students who struggle with chronic or high levels of stress definitely are very high-risk for anxiety and depression. Moreover, that in turn decreases their ability to cope, which then increases their stress. This is a vicious cycle that we need to be aware of. Disentangling stress and anxiety is tremendously challenging because they are so intertwined.

When you have a stress overload, high levels of stress, or a situation where the student is feeling stress in that situation, what you will often see is unhealthy coping, as I mentioned earlier. These are the behavioral choices that students make to try to cope with the stress: non-suicidal self-injury (which gives a physiological relief from stress), excessive gaming or internet use (which gives an effective distraction or emersion in another area that is more manageable or one that they are basically able to cope with), substance abuse or use (to self-medicate), or overeating or food restriction (as a way of either distraction, soothing, or control). When you are seeing this kind of unhealthy coping, you are really looking at a suicide risk.

Conclusion

Webinar: 19:11-20:17

PowerPoint Slides: 24-25

In conclusion, understanding and being able to identify the signs of stress is essential for you and for your students. Sharing this information with your students, you would be surprised how little they understand that stress is not in the exam you are giving them or the assignment: that it is located within them, and that, indeed, there are many different points at which they can intervene. It is not just during the experience of stress. Once we understand how that works, then we can use the strategies that I am going to share with you in Part II to intervene across those time points.

Thank you. The next step is really responding effectively to student stress. Here, I would like to share the link to the resources that you can see more detail of what we have talked about today.