



Professional Development Webinar
Part II: Responding Effectively to Student Stress | Transcription

Introduction

Webinar: 0:00-0:42

PowerPoint Slides: 1-3

This is the second part of a two part series on understanding and responding effectively to student stress. Part II hones in on responding effectively to student stress. Specifically, we are going to talk about a little background, a review of Part I (core elements of understanding and identifying stress), and then we are going to focus on the strategies for stress management, classroom applications, and concluding comments about how important it is to respond effectively to stress in our students.

Review of Stress & Strategies for Intervening

Webinar: 0:43-3:12

PowerPoint Slides: 4-10

So, a brief background review of Part I: core concepts. First, stress is an internal experience that we have when we perceive the demands of the situation are greater than we can cope with. As much as a student thinks an exam is stressful, the stress is within themselves in terms of how they interpret the situation. Second, stress can manifest itself in multiple ways, and students experience it far beyond just emotional experience of stress. Third, stress levels vary along a continuum and this affects performance. Our goal in effective response to student stress is to keep them in the optimal range of optimal stress for optimal performance. Furthermore, we tend to think that the time to intervene with stress with students is really during the experience of the stress but, in fact, it is important to use strategies before, during and after the actual feeling of stress is experienced.

What are the strategies to intervene? Well, there are many, many strategies out there, as you are likely aware. You may well have Googled or looked for them either for yourself or for your students multiple times. So why am I choosing these strategies? I am choosing these strategies because I know from working in schools for over 25 years that certain strategies work well in the classroom. Certain strategies are very accessible to adolescents. These are the strategies that adolescents like, adolescents respond to and use, and we personally, my team has found them effective and they have a lot of evidence behind them.

So what are these strategies? It is really a toolkit. We do not want one strategy we want multiple strategies because we need to intervene before, during, after. We need to intervene physiologically, emotionally, and cognitively as well as in the behavioral choices that students make. These strategies will address that multitude of aspects: stop thought challenge, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing, mindfulness, and self-care.

Strategy #1: Stop Thought Challenge

Webinar: 3:13-4:30

PowerPoint Slide: 11

Let us start with the stop thought challenge. This technique comes from cognitive behavior therapy: it is a core aspect of that. Students who are highly stressed tend to be very self-critical. They have a lot of negative, repetitive thoughts. Things like, "I am so stupid," "Why can't I get this right?" "What's wrong with me?" The stop thought challenge the way it works is that we teach the student, step one, when you have that thought, notice you are having that thought, and imagine a flashing stop sign; stop, no, stop. Does that mean stop the thought? No, it means stop. Take a deep breath. Breathe in and then with that breath challenge that, really say to yourself, "Is that accurate?"

Challenge and question the facts about that statement negative thought in your head as if you were your own best friend. We are often hardest on ourselves, and a friend (if we said the same thing to them) they would tell us a much kinder perspective. Thoughts are thoughts. They are not facts, they are not truths, and this is something our students need to learn.

Strategy #2: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Webinar: 4:31-6:22

PowerPoint Slide: 12

The second strategy is something easier. It is called progressive muscle relaxation. Some of you may already be very familiar with this. This is a great technique because it physically turns off the stress response and there are no cognitive requirements. The student does not have to believe in it. They do not have to think it is going to work. They do not have to be thinking clearly to do it. It can be done anywhere.

The example I am going to give you is going to show a visual of how you can do it. In fact, you can do this anywhere. It involves tensing and then relaxing each muscle group in the body while, as you tense and relax, noticing the feeling in your muscles. Here, we have sitting on a chair scrunching up your face and then relaxing, but we want our students to be able to do it anywhere. They do not have to use their face in this at all; you can limit it to anything from below the neck. I can do something like tighten my fists as hard as I can, and no one has to see I am doing that, during or before an exam. I tighten, hold, notice the feeling in my fists, and then I relax and I feel the different feeling in my hands. Tense my arms, feel, relax, and feel the feeling. You move through your legs, tighten, hold, feel, relax. If a student does this it,

is a calming effect and they can do it a multitude of times while they are sitting in that exam and it will calm down the stress response.

Strategy #3: Breathing

Webinar: 6:23-9:58

PowerPoint Slides: 13-14

The next strategy is similar to progressive muscle relaxation because it is not a cognitive-demanding aspect. When we asked adolescents, “What have you been told to do to handle your stress?” what they say is, “I’ve been told to take a deep breath.” That is an excellent piece of advice, but, sadly, we do not all know how to take a deep breath.

When you feel your breath, even now listening to me, are you aware of where your breath is going? Can you see, is it in the upper chest? Is it lower down, more in the belly? The goal for stress management is to have as much belly, or diaphragmatic, breathing as we can, but many young people do not know how to do this.

I’m going to walk you through a specific way of doing this when a student is upset or routine calming. It is called the calming breath, and you will see in the process of doing that how you learn to do belly breathing. This calming breath has a few steps. In the visual that I am showing you, you can see we have a person lying down, but you can absolutely do it sitting in a chair in a classroom.

The key is you put your right hand over the heart and the left hand goes over the belly below the navel or belly button. Then, what you do is you tell the student notice where the breath is. Is it in the chest? Is the chest hand rising? Is the belly hand rising? That makes you aware of where your breath is.

For a calming breath, when we want the student to have the calming breath, we say, “Okay, I want you to inhale to your belly hand. Make that hand go up with your inhalation while keeping your heart hand still.” This forces the individual to breathe in to the belly or diaphragmatic breathing. Then, as they get better at this, you can teach them how to go into the belly hand then fill it up to the top with a little chest, or heart, breathing and then down from the chest down through the belly.

To truly get the calming effect of this technique, it is essential that you do it to a certain pace. You need to inhale to the belly, where you are going four slow counts through the nose, so you inhale through the nose to four, and then you exhale for six slow counts. This GIF that is available at the end with our resources help students to see the pace of their breathing. In, and a longer breath out. Key points for this is the breath out must be longer. Ideally, as they get better, you get them to notice the pause: inhale, pause, outhale, pause. This is very effective at calming the stress response.

Strategy #4: Mindfulness

Webinar: 9:59-13:48

PowerPoint Slides: 15-18

Our next group of strategies are mindfulness, which many of you I am sure have heard about. The mindfulness I am talking about today is a secular mindfulness drawn from John Kabat Zinn's work on mindfulness based stress reduction, which is what I am trained in. This is separate from the Buddhist traditions that mindfulness arose from, although we will certainly see a lot of commonalities with that.

The first piece of mindfulness is the awareness of the present moment. This is being aware of what you are experiencing in this moment: coming to your senses or noticing your thoughts. The second part is doing that on purpose, which means that as my awareness or attention wanders, as it will, I bring it back on purpose again, again, and again. Most importantly is the third part, acceptance of the present moment experience without judgment or harshness but with gentleness. When we are doing these strategies, when your mind wanders and you are trying to bring it back to what we are focusing on (whether it is the breath or the sound), it is important that you do not beat yourself up about that, you do not criticize yourself, and you do not judge ("I do not like that feeling"). You just notice what is happening and accept it.

This is critical with students who are highly stressed because, as I said earlier, they tend to be quiet self-critical, and sometimes a mindfulness exercise that is to be calming and gives them some lowering of emotion regulation difficulties actually leads to them thinking, "I am doing it wrong?" "Why can't I do this?" "What is wrong with me?" We need to make it clear that acceptance and gentleness is key.

Is mindfulness effective for highly stressed students? In fact, mindfulness has been used in a number of high-stress, demanding professions to enhance performance and ability to function under stress. What kind of high stress professions has there actually been use of mindfulness? The US Army used and has researched the effectiveness of mindfulness for their soldiers trained to serve in Iraq in combat situations to help them think clearly under these very stressful situations. Medical residents, in terms of being able to think clearly under highly stressful situations, have been trained to use mindfulness. First responders, similarly and CEO's and Fortune 500 leaders, in order to be able to lead even in high stress situations. So, yes, it is very effective in managing stress and anxiety when under tremendous duress.

Here in Hong Kong, mindfulness has arisen as a way to treat student and teacher stress and stress in the population. Secular mindfulness, we see that across the board for teachers and specifically for students, although it is extremely expensive and generally done in the community.

Can we use it in our classroom, if our students cannot take the time or have the resources to access this outside? Yes, absolutely. I am going to be giving you some strategies and describing them briefly, but there will be a downloadable PDF resource and links to relevant video examples at the end of this video.

a) Mindfulness in the Classroom: Mindful Moments

Webinar: 13:49-15:04

PowerPoint Slide: 19

The strategies for use in the classroom that we have incorporated effectively into the classroom and really changed students stress fall in to two groups. One is mindful moments. Mindful moments are brief, momentary 30 seconds, two minutes max, but just a few seconds where we ask the students to

become aware of physical sensations, sounds, or some other coming to their senses, coming into this moment.

I might say to you, “Now, let us just take a second and become aware of the feeling of the floor underneath your feet. Become aware of the feeling of the seat underneath you. Of perhaps the chair back against your back.” These drop-into-the-moments, momentary mindful few seconds, done frequently through the day lower the stress response, increase emotion regulation. They are very easy to incorporate despite an incredibly demanding curriculum.

b) Mindfulness in the Classroom: Mindful Practice

Webinar: 15:05-15:46

PowerPoint Slide: 19

Mindful practice is a more formal or structured guided practice. It should be very short if students are not familiar with it: three minutes. It can ultimately go up to 12 to 15 minutes. Starting small is important. Emphasizing that when they are doing this to do it without judging or labeling what they are doing: not criticizing themselves. This ideally is planned into the school day. One per day, or if one can do two that is even better, but you vary what they are because different students prefer different types of mindfulness practices.

i. Mindful Practice: Body Scan

Webinar: 15:47-16:47

PowerPoint Slide: 19

The body scan, which is really becoming aware of the feeling in your body, part by part. You move through your body, like the progressive muscle relaxation, but in this situation, the student is just noticing what is happening. The feeling in, let us say, your hands. What is the feeling in your hands right now? Not trying to change it, not tensing, not trying to relax, just noticing the sensation you have in your hands. Then, moving to noticing to noticing your forearms. The heat, the cold, the skin. You move through the body this way, and this is very effective in terms of making students aware of what their feeling in their body. Sometimes we rush through our day or our life, living very much in our head without an awareness of what we are feeling moment by moment in our body.

ii. Mindful Practice: Sitting Meditation

Webinar: 16:48-17:34

PowerPoint Slide: 19

Sitting meditation, which is the more traditional meditation, we think of where you are observing breath, sensations, and physical sensations. Possibly watching or observing emotions and thoughts in

turn, just noticing and observing without trying to change and with gentleness and non-judgment. It really expands awareness and it improves attention because every time your mind wanders you bring it back gently to what you are focusing on and observing. This really builds the muscle of attention and it helps students to understand that thoughts are just thoughts that come and go like any other event within yourself of your experience.

iii. Mindful Practice: Mindful Movement

Webinar: 17:35-18:33

PowerPoint Slide: 19

Then there is mindful movement. This is about focusing attention on your body and noticing the feeling of the movement. Not trying to change anything, we are relaxed: just noticing what is happening. You can have the students sitting in their chair. You can think of it like chair yoga, but it is not really yoga, because we are not yoga instructors. It is just sitting in the chair and having the students do things like raise their arms up high and feeling that sensation and then down and noticing the feeling, noticing the feeling as the move their shoulders back. Maybe even having them stand beside their desk, walk in place, and feel the contact with the ground and the movement of their legs. This is really an excellent way to develop a sense of body awareness and grounding in the present moment by coming into your body with movement, which is very helpful.

iv. Mindful Practice: Breath Awareness

Webinar: 18:34-18:48

PowerPoint Slide: 19

Breath awareness, if we go back how essential breath is, but this is really noticing the breath. You are not trying to control it. You are just noticing what your breath is doing, which is different from our earlier breath.

v. Mindful Practice: Yoga Nidra

Webinar: 18:49-19:07

PowerPoint Slide: 19

Yoga Nidra is something your students can download on their phone and have available, which is basically walking you through the different parts of your body in sequence to relax the body in preparation for a deep relaxation prior to sleep.

Strategy #5: Self-Care

Webinar: 19:08-20:10

PowerPoint Slide: 20

Our next group of strategies are self-care and better choices. We do tell our students this a lot, and we do talk to them about self-care and better choices, eating well, exercising, et cetera. What is unique about what I want to emphasize to you is generally students think that when the stress increases (exam period) this is when, “You know what? Forget about doing my exercise. Forget about eating well. I have to drink more coffee. I cannot eat well.”

In fact, we should go about it the opposite way. Tell your students to think of coming into that stressful period as in training. That is the most important time to eat well. The one time they have to try to prioritize the exercise, because that is the time where they need that extra self-care. You cannot tell an adolescent every day to be healthy, eat well, and exercise, but for training for high periods, yes, we definitely can.

Classroom Applications

Webinar: 20:11-22:02

PowerPoint Slides: 21-22

The classroom applications of this, when you can actually put this into place, are many. At arrival time, you can do ideally a formal mindfulness practice. Then, during transitions, you can train the students to know that when the light goes on or off they have to have a momentary mindful moment. Throughout the day, you want these mindful moments, just a few seconds. Then, to settle a class, if you are having some upset in the class and you want to settle them down, that is where you want to use the breath awareness or progressive muscle relaxation to ground them in that calm moment. At the end of the day, ideally you want another mindfulness practice.

Finally, in the specific situations of preparing for an exam, you want the self-care training. You want to have a regular mindfulness practice already in place because that will lower their stress response and improve their emotion regulation by decreasing reactivity, intensity, and increasing recovery. Also, encourage the stop thought challenge if they are having very catastrophising thoughts about the exam. In terms of right before an exam in your classroom: progressive muscle relaxation, calming breath, or a mindfulness practice. After an exam, that is very difficult. They have held tense the whole time. Mindful movement can really transition out of that difficult assignment or exam.

When a student is self-critical, model and talk them through the stop thought challenge. If a student is in distress, progressive muscle relaxation and calming breath.

Conclusion

Webinar: 22:03-22:51

PowerPoint Slides: 23-24

In conclusion, we really need to incorporate stress management into the classroom. We, as educators, need to model good stress management. We have to use these strategies ourselves because stress is contagious, and if you as the educator are stressed, that has effect directly on your students. Use them and model. Be aware that the stress response can vary in intensity and when it is interfering with daily functioning referral is needed. Finally, remember that stress can be deadly, but you can help change that in your classroom.