



Safety Corner

Topic: Manage Stress

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Learning Objective: Students will learn strategies for managing stress.

Vocabulary: Stress, stressors, self-advocacy

How do you define stress?

Stress is a state of mental tension and worry caused by situations in your life. Too much stress, or stress that stays around for too long with little relief, can be bad for your health.

Not all stress is bad. Stress often comes out of a desire to meet expectations. We tend to stress about the things we most care about or can directly impact us. Stress can excite you, boost your memory, or give you a quick burst of energy that helps you accomplish a task. These are some effects of good stress.

Stress is usually preceded by stressors - an event or external stimuli that causes stress. Some stressors only last for a short period like preparing for a big class project or an oral presentation. But other stressors may last longer - like moving from elementary school to a new middle school, or having to make new friends, or getting to know new teachers.

TDA - THINK DECIDE ACT

When you feel stressed, **THINK** about the situation or problem. Write it down or speak it aloud to the school counselor, a teacher or other trusted adult. Identify what is bothering you most and what actions will alleviate or minimize it.

DECIDE to take the choice that will not create worse problems. Remember, you are in charge of the choices you make. Therefore, you are in charge of the stress, not the other way around.

ACT. Take action to resolve the stressor and alleviate the stress. Try not to be paralyzed by anxiety. Anxiety fuels thoughts about failing, instead of succeeding. People often get stuck at this point and try to simply avoid the problem. That may be a temporary choice, but the long-term choice is to take positive action to resolve the problem or reduce the stressors that are causing it.



One more very important way of dealing with stress. ASK FOR HELP. Talk to someone you trust. It can be a friend, counselor, religious mentor, or a family member. If you broke your arm, or caught the flu, you would seek medical help. Sometimes seeking help for mental pain is equally as important as seeking help for physical pain. If you have problems coping with stress, you need to seek help too!

Seeking help is a form of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is the ability to speak up for what you need.

Also, it is important to advocate for others and speak up for those that can't find the strength to speak for themselves. If you have a friend that you know is having a hard time managing stress, speak in private to someone that can help them. Friends don't let friends struggle alone.

Instructor: We'll be learning about successful strategies for managing stress as we analyze the choices of a boy named Tom Skittelwinner. As I read the story of Tom Skittelwinner, I will pause to discuss Tom's choices. When I do, you must quickly analyze whether Tom made a good choice or a poor choice. We'll also discuss the influence of his choices on the stress he creates in his life.

Instructor: Let's give it a try!

Once upon a time there was a boy named Tom Skittelwinner who loved to watch and play sports. One evening he stayed up late watching the playoffs, even though he knew he had to attend early morning basketball practice.

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Probably not a good choice. With little to no sleep, it may be difficult for Tom to have a successful day in school tomorrow. Being successful in school is your most important job right now.



Story: After the excitement ended, Tom told himself he would go right to bed. It seemed he had just fallen into a deep, wonderful sleep when his alarm clock rang, reminding him it was time for early morning basketball practice. The alarm was a loud, annoying reminder that he disliked the requirement of early morning practice. He turned over and slapped the alarm until it stopped. Silence fell upon the room again and he fell sound asleep. A few moments later, however, he was again awakened by the alarm. This time he threw the alarm clock across the room.

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Poor choice. A better choice might have been to sit up, turn off the alarm, and perhaps use exercise to work out the stress he deliberately created by choosing to stay up late.

Story: Tom's mother heard the commotion and came running into the room. "Tom, what's going on in here?" she demanded as she eyed the broken alarm clock pieces scattered across the rug. "Did you break your new alarm clock? The cost of the next clock is coming out of your allowance! Now get up. If you're late for practice, you'll have to do extra laps!" With only 35 minutes to shower, get dressed, gather his homework, eat, brush his teeth, and make the bus, Tom was stressed. He was dressing when his phone buzzed. It was a message from his good friend, Willie. Willie had sent cartoons and commentary from the playoff game last night. Amused, Tom sat down to scroll through the messages from Willie and his friends.

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Poor choice. Having a lot to do in a little amount of time was stressful, but it gave Tom the boost of energy he needed to do it. Are you ever in a hurry and feel energetic? That's a good stressor! The decision to read social media messages, however, is counterproductive to arriving to practice on time and will likely create more stress.



Story: After Tom read the messages, he finished dressing, gathered his homework, ate breakfast, and missed the bus by 3 minutes. Trudging back home, he asked his mother to drive him to school. "Fine," she said. "But the roads are packed with snow this morning and I will have to drive slow. I'm not sure you will make basketball practice." He didn't.

When he arrived at school half an hour late, he was met in the hallway by Robert. "Wherever you were, this morning," Robert teased, "I don't care! Coach picked the starters for the big game tomorrow and guess who got your usual position? Me!" Tom had forgotten completely about the big game with their long-time rivals.

High school recruiters would be there to scout for talent and Tom had his eye on the new technology high school across town. "Thanks, pal. You'll be watching my three-pointers from the sidelines!" taunted Robert.

Tom grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into a locker. "Oh yeah?" he snarled into his face as Robert squealed, "Help!"

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Poor choice. Hitting or hurting someone is never a good choice, regardless of how stressed you might feel. This kind of impulsive action does not resolve anything and will only exacerbate the situation - making things worse.



Tom might have tried this strategy:

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Story: Just then, Principal Ivan turned the corner. "Tom, what are you doing?" he exclaimed. Tom released Robert's collar. Robert slid down the wall whimpering, "I was just telling him about the big game tomorrow." "That's it, Mr. Skittelwinner. Violence is no way to solve differences!"

Principal Ivan escorted him by the arm and led him to his office. "You'll be in In-school-suspension for the rest of the day," he announced as he handed the paperwork to the office manager. "No, no wait!" Tom pleaded. "If I'm suspended this week, I can't play in the game tomorrow. I didn't hurt him! I was just playing around!"



Honest! He just can't take a joke!" Principal Ivan motioned for Tom to follow him to the suspension room. When they arrived in the suspension room, Ms. Peters, the In-school-suspension teacher, handed Tom a stack of worksheets. "Your social studies teacher needs you to complete this work by noon," she announced. Tom looked over the work. "I did this last night while I watched the game. It's in my backpack." Tom rifled through his backpack and notebooks but found no sign of the social studies work. "Oh no," he moaned. "I must have left it on the couch where I was watching TV.

Can I turn it in tomorrow?"

"No," she said firmly. "Mrs. Schumer wants it today. I guess you'll have to do it over."

"No way," he grumbled and shoved the books off the desk. The books tumbled to the ground. Tom folded his arms and placed his head on the desk.

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Poor choice. A better choice might have been to try to negotiate or reason with the teacher. For example, could he demonstrate he knew the information verbally? Could he complete most of it from memory since he had done it the night before?

Were there any other assignments that were similar and would fulfill the objectives of the assignment? If Tom had followed TDA - THINK DECIDE ACT, he might have been able to identify actions to take that would have decreased his stress and frustration, rather than increase it.



Story: Tom immediately felt anxious. All he could think about was the important game he would be missing tomorrow. The more he thought about Robert playing the position he felt he deserved, the angrier he got. If he was going to have any chance at all in playing in the game tomorrow or any other game for that matter, he needed to talk to Coach. Today.

He lamented his choices and committed to making better ones for the rest of the day. After all, he reasoned, things could be worse. If his mother had not been able to drive him to school, he would be further behind in his school work. If they had been in a car accident on the icy roads, he would really be in bad shape. If he had arrived at basketball practice late, he would have had to complete ten extra laps. Things looked pretty bad now but they could have been so much worse.

He picked up the books off the floor and decided to complete the assignment. It would take far less time since he had done it before. After turning in the assignment, he pulled out a sheet of paper and made a list of all the things that hadn't gone wrong that morning.

Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Good choice. Three good choices, really. The first choice used a strategy we call "Mindfulness." This is when you stop rehearsing a problem and deliberately focus instead on something else. For Tom, that was refusing to think about the basketball game and focusing on the social studies assignment instead. Coach Schumer had taught him that strategy last month.



When a player is at the free throw line, if he thinks about the crowd in the stands or thinks about missing the ball, he will probably miss the throw. He has to practice mindfulness - refusing to rehearse potential problems and focusing on the task.

The second good choice Tom made was to TDA - THINK DECIDE ACT. Tom thought about his choices and his actions. He recognized that one way to resolve his stress was to speak with the coach directly.

He decided to make better choices and took immediate action to resolve the social studies assignment problem.

The third good choice Tom made was to reach for the "Silver Lining." Reaching for the "Silver Lining" is a strategy in which you focus on the positive instead of the negative in a situation.

Sometimes reminding yourself that regardless of how bad things seem, it could always be far worse, is a good strategy to reduce anxiety. It fosters gratitude. Studies show that those who practice showing and expressing gratitude are actually happier and healthier.

A gratitude exercise can be as simple as finding three things you are grateful for and looking for the positive in the situation.

Story: Ms. Peters was pleased to receive Tom's social studies assignment and immediately provided more work from other classes. Tom breezed through his work. At lunch time, Ms. Schumer, the Social Studies teacher, stopped by to discuss the assignment. "Great job," she said slapping his hand in a high five. "I'll be glad to see you back in class tomorrow." Tom grinned. She never seemed nice to him before.

Coach Schumer stopped by next and Tom explained his day to him - owning responsibility for all the choices he had made that had caused him stress and anxiety.



Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Good choice. You may not have control over everything that happens in your life. But you do have control over how you choose to respond to it. If you make poor choices, own them and vow to make better ones. Then move on. All of us have made poor choices at some point in our lives. Accepting your imperfections as well as your perfections reflects a healthy emotional state. So, if you make good choices, own those too and encourage yourself to continue to make choices that benefit you.

Story: "My wife told me you were in here today," said Coach. "I was disappointed to hear that. You know you can't play in the game tomorrow because of our policy that requires good behavior for all sports players. But if you are really interested in going to the new technology high school, the coach there is a good friend of mine. I will put in a good word for you. Maybe invite him to the game next week?" Tom grinned again.

After school, Tom made his way to the bus stop. Robert was standing nearby with several of his friends. "How'd you like being on lock down today?" teased Robert. "I really pretended to be hurt to make sure you wouldn't be playing any ball tomorrow. And guess what? You're not! I'll blow you a kiss from the free throw line!"

Tom felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. In his head, he had some nasty words he ached to repeat. But he thought about it, decided he would rather have Robert believe that he didn't care about the game, and decided to act by walking away.



Good choice or poor choice?

Answer: Good choice. Tom's strategy is called "Changing the Channel." It just means that when you feel stress or anxiety, you can find a positive distraction, such as taking a walk, or a shower, or breathing deeply. It sounds weird, but breathing actually helps manage stress. Breathe with your stomach and as you breathe in, say, "I am breathing in" and as you are breathing out, say, "I am breathing out." Come, let's try this together. (Repeat 2 times.)

Story: As Tom strolled away, Mrs. Richards, his nextdoor neighbor, pulled up in her new SUV. The Richards' had three awesome daughters that attended the middle school and they raced up to the car. Mrs. Richards stuck her head out the door and called to Tom, "You want a ride home?"

Tom grinned and grabbed the back door. "Yes, ma'am," he called back.

"Tom, I hope you don't mind if we make a quick stop at the new technology high school to pick up my husband. He is the new assistant basketball coach there. I'll bet there is plenty you two have in common."

Tom grinned and waved back at the students on the bus. The day may have gotten off to a rough start but things were certainly looking up!

Instructor: This is the end of our story of Tom. His negative ways of dealing with stress were inappropriate. But sometimes stress has a more devastating effect on people.

There are a couple handouts below that have quick tips for how to manage stress along with some additional resources.

Sources:

ULifeline. (2017). How do you tell the difference between good stress and bad? Retrieved from <http://www.ulifeline.org/articles/450-good-stress-bad-stress>

Partnership for Drug-Free Kids. (2017). Seven tips to help your child deal with school stress. Retrieved from <http://drugfree.org/parent-blog/school-stress-7-tips-help-college-student-manage-anxiety/?gclid=CLeuys6exdMCFR2ewAodBQcPaA>



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Strategies for Managing Stress

Be Mindful - *Stop rehearsing a problem and deliberately focus instead on something else.*

Reach for the Silver Lining - *focus on the positive instead of the negative in a situation.*

Evaluate and own your behavior - *You may not have control over everything that happens in your life. But you do have control over how you choose to respond to it.*

Ask for help - *Talk to someone you trust.*

Think, Decide, Act - *THINK about the situation. DECIDE to take the choice that will not create worse problems. Take positive ACTION.*

Help/advocate for others.

Encourage yourself & change the channel - *Find a positive distraction.*





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If you or someone you know needs help . . .

National Websites & Resources

- <http://chat.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/GetHelp/LifelineChat.aspx>
- LGBTQ Youthline: 1-800-268-9688, <http://www.youthline.ca/>
- <http://www.netsmartz.org/teens>

Colorado Resources

- Safe2Tell: 1-877-542-7233, <https://safe2tell.org/>
- Colorado Crisis Services: 1-844-493-8255, <http://coloradocrisisservices.org/>
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255, <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
- The Trevor Project Line: 1-866-488-7386, <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

