

Wellbeing: Understanding Stress Facilitator Guide

Overview and Purpose

This lesson explores how pupils can use their understanding of stress to improve their response to challenging situations.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Understand what stress is
- Recognise where stress might be in our lives
- Have the ability to understand and recognise stress in others

Vocabulary

- Stress - A state of worry or mental tension induced by challenging or difficult situations
- Prefrontal Cortex - the grey area of matter in the anterior of the frontal lobe which plays an important role in our cognitive, emotional and behavioral functions
- Limbic system - the area of the brain which controls our behavioural and emotional responses

Preparation / Materials Needed

- Chart Paper / Post It Notes
- Marker pens
- Download the session PowerPoint
- Handouts - Facial Recognition (1 per person)

For virtual delivery, students can make their own notes (on paper or on a device) and can download their own copy of the activities pack.

Agenda

Understanding Stress (10 min)

- What is stress?

Recognising Stress (10 mins)

- Activity - facial recognition card based exercise

Wrap-up & Reflection (5 mins)

- Reflection on the session and its learning objectives

Wellbeing: Understanding Stress Teacher Notes

This guide includes a suggested script for the session (in orange). However, please feel free to tailor and adapt this accordingly when delivering.

Getting Started / Warm Up

Have you ever been late for a lesson, train or bus? How do you feel about the people who are walking slowly in front of you?

Our responses when we are “stressed” can be irrational, in the situation above it is easy to see every person who is in your way as being “stupid” or “deliberately slowing us down”. What triggers that response?

The point of this activity is to get pupils to think about how our prefrontal cortex and limbic system interact. When we are in danger we want our limbic system to act fast and keep us safe. However modern living is quite safe but other factors can trigger the stress response and we behave “irrationally”. Therefore when we feel “stressed”, we don’t make good decisions.

Show slide 3 “Not one brain, but three”. The brain has **three** main areas.....

- Prefrontal Cortex, responsible for rational thought (thinking)
- Limbic System, responsible for instinctive/fast reactions to keep us safe (Flight, Fright, Fight or Flop)
- The Brain Stem, responsible for background task, breathing heart rate etc

Explain that stress causes us to bypass the Prefrontal cortex (rational) and cede control to the limbic system (reactionary).

OPTIONAL: According to your confidence and knowledge, you could discuss simply that “re-wiring” occurs in the teenage brain, leading to more dependence on the limbic system and therefore more instinctive, less thought out behaviours.

Teaching Tip: The focus here is around how different areas of our brain interact. This is often fascinating for students. Have they ever been told to “count to 10”? In effect this allows time for the prefrontal cortex to engage and take back control over the limbic system.

Wellbeing: Understanding Stress Teacher Notes

Main Activity

Give out the facial recognition handouts (see Lesson 1 handouts).

Allow students around 3 minutes to match each face to a description. If you want to highlight the effect of stress “squeeze” this time and keep calling out reminders/countdown

After 3 minutes, show slide 5 with the answers. Reassure that some expressions are challenging to differentiate. You may wish to discuss with groups that the prefrontal cortex in teenagers undergoes restructuring that may make them misunderstand expressions. You know your group in this respect.

The purpose of this activity is to help pupils understand that a simple task such as recognising facial expressions is so much harder when under stress. We use our Prefrontal cortex to do this usually but under stress we bypass that and the Limbic system takes over. This brain area is less able to do this task well and so will misinterpret reactions. The same is true of reading a text/snapchat/twitter or Instagram message and misunderstanding it when we are “stressed”.

Summary / Wrap up

What have we learned? Sharing experiences. Describe situation and why you thought you were under stress, how you reacted and how you would have liked to react differently?

For example: I had an argument with a friend yesterday, I was feeling stressed about seeing them today in school, I was impatient and rude with my parent/carer this morning. Perhaps using the “rational” brain I could have talked over my worries at home?

Optional follow up - Post it notes - which part of your brain do you feel you are using at the moment? This could be a weekly exercise for your group to gauge general stress levels. An A3 outline of the brain on your wall, students stick post its, either named or anonymous onto the outline as to whether they feel they are being more controlled by their “rational” or “chimp” brain.