

Helping Secondary School Students Understand and Regulate Stress

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Abstract

A psychoeducational unit on stress is provided for school counselors or other educators working with secondary school-aged students. The unit can be utilized as part of a guidance curriculum. An overview of stress response during adolescent development is provided. A brief historical and contextual description of guidance curriculum and its role in comprehensive school counseling programs are offered.

Helping Secondary School Students Understand and Regulate Stress

In America, stress has long been an element of American culture and contrary to popular belief stress is not limited to adults. During adolescence, stress can be both beneficial and detrimental to the development of young people. However, there are limited data available on how stress impacts adolescent development and the levels of stress experienced by this age group. For the first time a study about stress has included data on adolescents. According to results from an online study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), *Stress in America: Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits?*, teens are experiencing stress at rates similar to adults (APA, 2014). In the study 1,018 teens were surveyed and reported that student stress levels increase during the school year and exceeds levels that are healthy. Teens reported that stress directly impacted healthy behaviors such as exercise and eating a healthy diet. Further, teens reported feeling being overwhelmed, sad or depressed, and reported experiencing increased levels of fatigue (APA, 2014).

On a scale of 1-10, teens (aged 13-17) reported overall stress levels of 5.8, while adult surveyed in the same study reported a stress score of 5.1 (Jayson, 2014). Teens also stated that they did not believe that stressors would be diminished any time soon; rather the amount of stressors they would experience would increase (APA, 2014). According to the study, *Stress in America: Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits?*, stress is invading all aspects of life. Teens report that 59% of stress occurs from trying to balance all their activities, 40% stated that they neglected work at home and 21% reported neglecting work at school due to stress, 32% reported headaches associated with stress, and 21% reported changes in sleeping habit. Additionally, 26% of teens

stated that when under stress they were more likely to snap at or be short with classmates or teammates (Jayson, 2014). According to Norman B. Anderson, APA CEO and Executive Vice President:

In order to break this cycle of stress and unhealthy behaviors as a nation, we need to provide teens with better support and health education at school and home, at the community level, and in their interactions with health care professionals” (APA, 2014, para. 5).

It is important to note that other health professionals caution contributing all of the reported negative affects to stress (Jayson, 2014). Additionally, preliminary research on stress has indicated that an individual’s mindset may be able to shape one’s response to stress allowing individuals to perform better and for stress to be a positive effect in life rather than a negative effect (McGonigal, 2015). Regardless, teenagers are identifying the concept of stress as contributing to feelings of sadness and decreased participation in healthy life practices.

Overview of the Stress Response

In order to understand the complex processes and potential life-long effects associated with stress, it important to understand the stress response. The stress response is an innate response to protect life. A specific physiological pathway is initiated at the time that the human brain detects a threat to an individual (Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2013; Romeo, 2013). When a person experiences stress, two systems are activated to reduce the threat associated with the stressor. The first system involves a rapid response initiated by activation of the sympathetic nervous system leading to the release of the epinephrine and norepinephrine, triggering the flight or fight response (Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2013; Romeo, 2013). The second system is slower to initiate

the stress response in reaction to the perceived threat and is aided by the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. The hypothalamus releases a hormone releasing factor stimulating the pituitary gland to release adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), which in turn triggers the adrenal glands, specifically the adrenal cortex, to release cortisol and aldosterone. This release of these two substances cause the body to initiate a series of actions including the mobilization of energy stores, increased activity of the immune system and increasing learning and memory (Girdano et al., 2010; Romeo, 2013).

In addition to the changes initiated by these two systems, there are many areas of the brain that are directly and indirectly associated with and affected by the stress response. The limbic area of the brain is a group of structures including the hypothalamus, the amygdala and the hippocampus. The limbic system works together to incorporate the concept of emotion into the stress response (Girdano et al., 2010). The cerebral cortex is associated with the development and storage of analytical skills, verbal communication, learning and rational thought (Girdano et al., 2010). The final brain structure is the reticular formation, which is a network of neurons that carry impulses from the brain to the body; to the body from the brain and extends from the spinal cord through the thalamus. The reticular formation has connections within the limbic system, hypothalamus, and the cerebral cortex in order to alert the brain. The reticular formation receives information from incoming nerves, filters the vast amounts of information in order to forward to the brain only the information that is new or persistent. In addition, the reticular formation has the ability to prolong the stress response if a perceived threat remains (Girdano et al., 2010). Thus, the stress response

can become prolonged, and potentially harmful. Moreover, if the stress response is activated earlier in the life course, individuals may be at greater risk to the negative effects of stress.

Adolescent Brain Development and Stress

While the physiological changes occurring with the stress response are better understood than in the past, how these stress-related changes affect the development of the adolescent brain is relatively unknown. What is known is many factors converge during the development of the adolescent brain that put this age group at greater risk for the potentially harmful effects of sustained stress (Eiland & Romeo, 2013; Romeo, 2013). Adolescent brain development is situated in the prefrontal lobe and midbrain limbic region. Further, the main areas of the brain impacted by stress, the hippocampus, amygdala, and the prefrontal cortex are still maturing during adolescence.

Adolescent brain development is situated in the prefrontal lobe, midbrain limbic region, the hippocampus, and amygdala, all areas that are involved in the stress response and still maturing during adolescence. The amygdala is responsible for emotions, survival instincts, and memory; the hippocampus is associated with memory (Girdano et al., 2010). The prefrontal cortex is associated with logic and reasoning and is the last area of the brain to receive myelination, thus it is slower to development. Therefore, adolescents are more likely to react to stress via an emotional response than a logical response (Roaten & Roaten, 2010).

Additionally, initial reports indicated that during adolescence, the brain might be more responsive to glucocorticoids (cortisol) than adults (Lee, Brandy, & Koenig, 2003; Romeo, 2013). This is particularly troubling, as the presence of cortisol is believed to be

a significant contributor to the negative consequences of the stress response.

Moreover, when the brain perceives a threat it is responsible for the development of a behavioral pathway. Behavior responses can range from fight or flight to anxiety and vigilance. High levels of stress and anxiety can lead to an increase in risky behavioral choices, while other health protecting factors may be reduced including physical activity and healthy eating (McEwen, 2011). Currently, the amount of research specific to adolescence is limited. Further research is necessary to determine the risks associated with high levels of stress in adolescence.

Teenagers are self-reporting higher levels of stress than ever before and a scientific understanding of the impacts of stress on the adolescent brain is limited. Therefore, it is imperative for teenagers to understand and learn to cope with the negative effects of stress. School counselors are the most logical choice for undertaking this endeavor. School counselors have unlimited access to teens and the ability to educate and to create environments that support stress reduction practices. Students have reported higher levels of stress during the school months (Jayson, 2014). School counselors can help students to become more knowledgeable about stress, assess and identify attitudes about stress, and to learn how to regulate stress levels.

Historical Context of Guidance Curriculum

School Counseling Programs

The profession of school counseling began at the beginning of the 20th century during the socially unsettled times of the Industrial Revolution (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Industrial growth together with social reform, protest helped to spawn what has been termed the Progressive Movement. Vocational guidance was born during the

Progressive Movement and it evolved from concerns that people had regarding education, the economy, and social problems. In addition, people were worried about young people transitioning from school to the world of work (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). As a result, the seeds of the school counseling profession were sown.

Throughout the 20th century vocational guidance became transformed into school counseling and a wide variety of influences molded, shaped, and reshaped what was to become the school counseling profession that we know today. The evolution of counseling and measurement theories, the Russian Sputnik satellite, educational reforms, and many other developments have affected the development of school counseling (Gysbers, 2010). During the latter portion of the century, school counseling as a profession shifted in its perspective from that of a position (someone who conducts school counseling) to a program (complete with mission statements, content areas, philosophies, activities, and accountability).

The school counseling profession fostered a variety of comprehensive, developmental guidance and counseling programs created by a various authors (Gysbers & Henderson, 1988; Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 2001; Myrick, 1987). During the 1970s and 1980s there were several types of comprehensive guidance programs evolving throughout the country. Although they varied somewhat, all of these programs included guidance curricula that were based on student outcomes or competencies. These various programs emphasized that school counselors deliver a comprehensive and developmentally designed program rather than work within a *position* where they were seen as ancillary to the educational enterprise and focused on crisis or problem interventions. Near the end of the 1990s, Sink and MacDonald (1998)

found that approximately 50% of states had developed or adopted comprehensive guidance programs.

Leaders in the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recognized that many states had not adopted a program model for school counseling and that there were several program models being used in the field. They concluded that these conditions were resulting in a lack of uniformity and consistency from state to state and from school to school. Moreover, each program was founded on different guidance curriculum and associated student competencies. In order to create a national trend to evolving notion of school counseling programs, ASCA began the process of creating a school counseling program model that could be adopted by any state or school. In 1997, they began this process by introducing national standards for school counseling programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Consequently in 2003, ASCA introduced *The ASCA National Model* for school counseling programs, which has been revised over time (ASCA, 2003, 2005, 2012). As a result, there are several programs that have been adopted by states and schools. For example, the Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (MDESE) has used the Gysbers model of school counseling programs for many years and released in revision in 2017 (MDESE, 2017). Most, if not all, of them include a guidance curriculum component that is founded upon student competencies.

Guidance Curriculum Within Programs

The guidance curriculum component of a school counseling program is based upon standards and provides an educational element that school counselors present to students (Gysbers, 2012). A guidance curriculum is intended to be delivered to all

students within a school (ASCA, 2003, 2005, 2012; Gysbers, 1988, 2012; Myrick, 1987, 2011). The standards upon which a guidance curriculum is designed are dependent upon the school counseling model being used, although most are focused upon domains of student development. The domains are typically characterized as academic, career, and personal/social developmental domains (ASCA 2012; Gysbers, 2012; Myrick, 2011). These three areas have been the cornerstones of school counseling since the vocational guidance movement of the 1930s identified educational, vocational, and personal domains as key to the vocational development of students (Gysbers, 2012).

School counseling program models have historically, and even today, had their own set of student competencies or outcomes under each domain: academic, career, and personal/social. All of the program models suggest that the end user (i.e., school counselor) is responsible for designing the guidance curriculum and finding classroom activities to be used with students. In general, guidance curriculum design is based upon attitudes, knowledge, and skills within each of the domains of student development. Consequently, guidance curriculum topics and activities are designed to address the attitudes, knowledge, or skills within academic, career, and personal/social domains of student development.

One of the principal goals of school counseling is student success. In order to promote a student's success, it is necessary to enhance student development. Most models of school counseling include curricular content that is focused on academic, career, and personal/social developmental domains. While there are many aspects of a student's overall development, school counseling concentrates on these three

developmental domains that appear to be most associated with school and student success. Academic development refers to learning strategies and success in classes and other school-related activities. Career development is focused on those students' career paths and outcomes. Personal/social development, also referred to as social/emotional development, is focused on the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of a student's overall growth and development.

The academic, career, and personal/social domains of student development are designed by school counselors to cultivate and improve the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to promote student success. Academic, career, and personal/social development may be considered independently in isolation or collectively as interdependent elements because as developmental domains they occur and function both as distinct and interrelated parts of students' lives. It should be noted that school counselors utilize a variety of school counseling program models and some do not work from any model.

A guidance curriculum can be based upon a wide variety of standards. There are models of student well-being (Nelson, Tarabochia, & Koltz, 2015; Tarabochia, 2013), adolescent development (Search Institute, 2007), and career development (National Career Development Association, 2004) that all provide content standards related to child and adolescent development within the learning environment of school. School counselors are responsible to select group of standards that will guide the design and development of a guidance curriculum.

Guidance Curriculum and Stress

Stress, as a general concept, is included directly or indirectly in most of the school counseling models and it may be characterized within standards, indicators, competencies, mindsets, outcomes, or behaviors (ASCA, 2014; MDESE, 2017; Myrick, 2011). Academic, career, and personal/social development of student success may be adversely affected by stress in a wide variety of ways.

Unhealthy stress in students' lives can impede their academic progress, their career choices, and their personal development. While certain types and levels of stress may be beneficial (eustress) by promoting motivation and action; stress may also be detrimental (distress) by repressing confidence and self-efficacy (Selye, 1975), which may inhibit positive student outcomes and success. Moreover, stress can be characterized as being a part of the human condition and not something to be eliminated, but something to be regulated and even harnessed in order to tip the balance from harmful element towards useful and productive attribute. Consequently, students can benefit from a guidance curriculum unit comprised of information related to the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of stress regulation and management.

Stress Unit and Practical Application

School counselors typically have limited time throughout the year to allocate to the delivery of classroom lessons embedded within a guidance curriculum. Consequently, lessons and topics must be concise and relevant if adolescent students are to engage and retain the material presented. The stress unit we propose will consist of four classroom presentations that can be used with secondary students in middle or high school. Each lesson is intended to last approximately 45 minutes. The unit included

may be used in part or in its entirety within an individual counseling, group counseling, or classroom guidance context. When taken together and presented in order, the stress unit aims to guide students toward knowledge (awareness), attitude (perception or outlook), and skills (competencies). This stress unit is founded on the idea that learning and change happen most effectively when knowledge, attitude, and skills are imparted to students. Several of the lessons have been modified with permission from a collection of guidance curriculum activities (Nelson, 2011a, 2011b). The lessons are not derived from research-based sources; however, school counselors can utilize action research techniques to measure student learning outcomes. Students could be surveyed using a Likert-type scale regarding their knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to stress in their lives. These surveys could be administered in pre-post or post-only designs.

Lesson one is focused on teaching adolescent students briefly about stress and stress management. It is mostly pedantic and concentrates on transferring information about stress to students. This information may be new students and may help them be more aware of how they engage their own stress and that it is possible to manage and regulate their stress in order to live more fully.

Attitude is an essential ingredient to learning and change. Without an appropriate attitude toward stress, it is unlikely that a lasting change will endure. Consequently, we devote lesson two and three to activities designed to address the development of a healthy informed attitude about stress and its management. These two lessons attempt to help students realize that they can control some of their stress response and its management. We want students to control their stress, rather than be controlled by it.

Once knowledge has been transferred, and hopefully retained to some degree, and attitudes have been acquired or adjusted, skills can be learned. Lesson four, the ultimate goal of the unit, has three activities from which a counselor or educator can choose. All three lessons have been designed to teach students how to manage and regulate their stress. We have offered three activities for the purpose of providing school counselors with the opportunity to choose an activity that best suits their students. Additional activities allow the counselor to extend the unit if desired or to use some or all of the activities with in individual or group settings. It may even be useful to use some or the entire unit in working with parents either as stress pertains to their children or themselves.

Lesson 1: Knowledge – Stress Management

The following is a mini-lecture followed by a classroom activity regarding stress. If students are informed that you will be talking with them about stress and how to control it in their lives, they may be likely to be interested. You may read and write the following comments on the board:

Stress management is mostly a learned skill. All of us are born with a natural "alarm system" in our brains that was originally designed to prepare us to deal with real physical threats and dangers. This alarm system is natural/biologic and helpful; it is intended to keep us safe. During our normal everyday living, most of us do not experience truly physical threatening events, and over time we have evolved and learned to apply our alarm system to a variety of psychological threats. Stress can be characterized as a "false alarm" – an erroneous activation of the "danger alarm" system of the brain. The biological purpose of this system is to help prepare us for dealing with real, physical danger. When the danger alarm is turned on, it produces a physiological response called the "fight or flight" reaction, which helps us to fight the danger or flee it. When you are in real, immediate physical danger, it is appropriate to feel afraid. Getting

your body charged up with adrenaline may well help to keep you alive. However, most of the time when we feel stressed, there is no immediate danger, so it is a false alarm. The fire alarm is sounding, but there is no fire!

Explain some terms and concepts related to stress.

- *Excitement: an emotional reaction which elevates cognitive and physiological activity levels.*
- *Stimuli: puts demands upon the system for physical or cognitive productivity.*

Identify examples of eustress and distress.

- *Eustress: positive stress that results in improved health and well-being. It may include exhilarating challenging experiences of success followed by higher expectations.*
- *Distress: negative stress that results in diminished health and well-being. It may include disappointment, failure, threat, embarrassment, and other negative experiences.*

Explain the difference between stress management and stress reduction.

- *Stress Reduction: eliminating the source of stress making changes, taking action.*
- *Stress Management: coping, recovery, re-interpretation, reframing cognitive restructuring.*

Discriminate between stress, stressor, stress reaction, and strain.

- *Stress: general concept describing a "load" on the system, usually external, with humans it is internal.*
- *Stressor: a specific problem, issue, challenge, personal conflict, may be external or internal*
- *Stress Reaction: an individual response to a given stressor, may be physiological, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and include signs and symptoms*

- *Strain: the prolonged impact of a the stressor on the system, may result in overload, fatigue, precursor to illness*

Explain the potential benefits of stress management training for the individual.

- *Learn to recognize and respond to early warning signs of overload and burnout (headache and fatigue)*
- *Learn new models of effective stress management and pick those right for you (lifestyle, symptoms)*
- *Become aware of the immediate physical signs of stress (cold, sweaty hands, nervous tense)*
- *Recognize and respond to emotionally distressing events in your life (change exposure if possible)*
- *Learn to recognize speech patterns that reflect "tension"(rapid, accelerating)*
- *Develop more efficient and relaxing breathing patterns to reduce tension (abdominal breathing)*
- *Discover ways to use these warning signs as signals to change work or leisure circumstances to reduce stressors*

Explain the research-based limitations of stress management.

- *No guarantee that health risks are reduced, however many infectious and chronic diseases can be prevented*
- *No guarantee that medical illness can be cured. Spontaneous remission may be related to stress.*
- *No guarantee everyone responds well to training. Personality, background, or patterns/habits may prevent success.*
- *Potential risk of avoiding other psychological issues. Stress symptoms may be early manifestation of more serious psychological problems like depression.*

If time permits, ask students to get into small groups and discuss three key points or takeaways from today's lesson.

Lesson 2: Attitude – Dealing With Stress Activity

A gift or shoe box that has a bottom lined with paper and the word “HOPE” written in letter large enough for the class to be able see when shown the inside of the box from the front of the room, 2-3 slips of paper per student, pencils. Do not show them that HOPE is written in the bottom of the box until later.

Distribute the slips of paper to your students and ask them to write one personal stressor on each slip of paper and put the slips into the “Stress Box.” After everyone has put in their slips, open the box and read one of the stressors identified by your students. Ask the students to share their feelings and reactions about the stressor. Encourage them to examine the impact that such experiences have in young people’s lives. As you finish discussing each stressor, wad up the slip of paper and throw it in the trash.

When you and the class have discussed all of the slips of paper, remove the lid and show them that at the bottom of the box lies **HOPE**. Emphasize the significance of hope and having a positive attitude in managing stress. Adapting from Mark Twain a bit, stress is an issue of mind over matter: if you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter. Think about it.

Specific Suggestions

You may want to ask some of these follow-up questions. How do you cope with your stress? What is the difference between internal and external stress? What sorts of effects does stress have on your body? What sorts of events in your life are not stressful at all? Are there any kinds of stressors that are actually healthy or help you in

some positive way? What sorts of strategies do you use to help someone who is stressed out?

(Adapted with permission from Nelson, 2011b)

Lesson 3: Attitude – Positive Affirmations

Students, not unlike adults, tend to concentrate on the negative aspects of themselves. When asked to generate a list of strengths and weaknesses, students often have a much longer list of negatives than positives. Put-downs and self-deprecating comments are common among adolescents. "I'm not going to do well on this assignment; I'm just not good enough; I'm not smart enough, fast enough, tall enough..." Eventually negative thoughts may become self-fulfilling and we *become* what we have been thinking. So, the opposite can be true as well. If we construct positive thoughts and ideas; these too can be self-fulfilling.

As a tool positive affirmations are positive statements that help challenge and overcome negative thinking and sabotaging behaviors. They are generally brief, positive statements that target a specific aspect, behavior, or belief that your students are struggling to change.

Ask your students to think of the areas that they would like to change or improve. For example, do they wish that they had better athletic skills? Or better relationships with their friends or family? Or do they want to improve their academic performance? Ask them to make a list of areas or behaviors they would like to work on; not too long. Then, for each of these, have the student come up with a positive statement they can repeat several times a day. It's also important that the affirmation is realistic, possible

and believable. Reinforce that for it to work, keep it realistic! It is difficult for the affirmations to work if the students do not believe them.

Here are a few attributes for effective affirmations:

- The affirmations should be written in the present tense, like they are already happening. For example, “I make 65% of the free-throws I attempt, or I am good when I speak in front of my class, or I enjoy earning a 3.0 GPA.”
- Affirmations need to be repeated throughout the day. They can do them in the shower, walking to school or the bus stop, walking home, in their room, or just before bed. The more the merrier. After all, most of us repeat our negative self-talk numerous times a day and we must use positive talk to compete with that. It is important to emphasize that many of us have spent years talking negatively in our heads or out loud. So now we are working to change that so we must say it a lot to begin to win this struggle.
- Affirmations should be said with feeling and thought of deliberately. These actions improve the likelihood that a change can happen; it sets up belief.

Here are some examples of positive affirmations:

- I do well on my homework assignments.
- I can do this (fill in the blank)!
- My point of view is heard and valued by my team.
- I am successful at school.
- I am confident in my life, and with my friends.
- I enjoy getting good grades.
- I enjoy living in my family.
- I am a kind and a helpful person at home.
- I am excellent at what I do.
- I am a happy person.

- I am confident in my life.
 - I have courage in my life and at school.
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Lesson 4: Skills – Relaxation Techniques

The following activities can be read to your students within the classroom or counseling group settings. Counselors or teachers can facilitate these activities.

Progressive Relaxation

Progressive relaxation is a technique where participants are asked to systematically tense and relax their muscles for the purpose of releasing tension and promoting relaxation. Encourage the students to get comfortable in their chairs or on the floor, whatever is appropriate for your setting. Invite your students to start simply by closing their eyes and taking slow and deliberate breathes; focusing on the feeling of breathing in and breathing out. After 30 or 40 seconds, you can inform them that they will begin to focus their attention on their muscles. The general instructions for the activity are as follows:

- *Close your eyes, breathe in and out slowly, and tense or tighten the muscle group (tense tightly, but not so much that you feel pain or have cramps) for about 5 seconds.*
- *When you breathe out, slowly and completely relax the muscle group quickly; not gradually, but do it quickly. Focus on letting go of the tension as you exhale, let it go.*
- *Relax for 5-10 seconds and we will move on to the next muscle group. Pay attention to how your muscles feel different when they are relaxed from when they are tensed.*
- *Move progressively through the following list of muscle groups.*

Muscle Group	How to Tense
<i>Toes</i>	<i>Curl up your toes</i>
<i>Calves</i>	<i>Flex them tightly</i>
<i>Knees</i>	<i>Lock them straight, but not too tight</i>
<i>Thighs</i>	<i>Clench them, it may involve other muscles</i>
<i>Gluts or buttocks</i>	<i>Tighten and squeeze them</i>
<i>Back</i>	<i>Arch, but not too much</i>
<i>Stomach</i>	<i>Tighten</i>
<i>Hand</i>	<i>Make fists first, then spread fingers wide</i>
<i>Biceps</i>	<i>Tighten without locking your elbows</i>
<i>Shoulders</i>	<i>Shrug them – lift towards your ears</i>
<i>Face</i>	<i>Scrunch and contort your face</i>
<i>Neck</i>	<i>Touch your chin to your chest – keep your teeth together</i>
<i>Neck and head</i>	<i>Lift your head straight up like a string was pulling your head up</i>

When finished, continue relaxed breathing for 20-30 seconds, then 5-4-3-2-1 and open your eyes.

Lesson 4 (Alternate): Mind and Body: Relax Your Thoughts and Feelings

Start by guiding your students through these two visualizations and discussions.

Think of a time when you were angry, really angry. Relive that time. Let yourself be angry all over again. Think about the event that you got angry about, go with it. As you breathe in, let your anger grow. As you breathe out, hold onto the angry feelings. Keep feeling and thinking anger until you are full. Now relax a bit and join answer some questions:

- *Where in your body do you feel your anger? Where is it the strongest?*
- *Does it move around or is it still?*
- *Is it hot, cold, or cool?*
- *Does it feel rigid or flexible?*
- *If you could give it a color, what color would it be?*
- *What shape would it be?*

Now, lead your students through a more relaxed visualization.

Think of a time when you were happy, relaxed, and calm. Take a moment and really think this time. Let your tension go. Breathe easy and calm. Think of the feelings you have during this event or place. As you breathe in, let your happy and relaxed feelings grow. Let them get bigger and swell. As you breathe out, hang onto these happy feelings. Keep thinking and breathing until you are full of the happy and relaxed feelings.

Now, answer a few questions:

- *Where in your body do you feel happy and relaxed? Where is it the strongest?*
- *Does it move around or is it still?*
- *Is it hot, cold, or cool?*
- *Does it feel rigid or flexible?*
- *If you could give it a color, what color would it be?*
- *What shape would it be?*
- *First, you made yourself angry and now happy and more at ease, what is it like to control your feelings?*
- *Can you think of a time when you forgot that you can control how you feel? What happened?*

- *How can you remember that sometimes you are in control of your feelings? What could you do to remind yourself?*

Share with your students that it can be very helpful to remember that sometimes, they can control how they feel and that they can relax and soothe their tension, if they just stop long enough to remember.

(Adapted with permission from Nelson, 2011a).

Lesson 4 (Alternate): Switches

Many students can attest to the idea that various elements in their environment may contribute to a change in their mood state. Using this common experience as a means to self-regulate can offer students a technique to switch their current or emerging stress level to a lower level or to switch it to something else entirely. The following activity is meant to set up process whereby students can develop a mental picture of a low-level stress environment, become self-aware enough to identify their current or emerging stress levels, and switch the current stress state to an alternative lower stress level.

Explain to students that the good news is that stress can be regulated and controlled by them to a significant degree. If they *feel* the stress, then they can choose to *feel* something else instead; however, they have to know how. This activity includes an imagery exercise, a tactile switch, and a plan for practice and application. During the imagery exercise, speak in a calm and slow tone to give them time to visualize and experience the activity.

First, have them relax: close your eyes, take some deep relaxing breaths, clear your minds of all things, just be here right now, feel any tension in your body and

release it, let it go, just be here in this room... Now see yourself get up to go through the door, on the other side of the door is a well-lit tunnel, you go through the door and into the tunnel, it is easy to see in the tunnel as you go forward, you follow the tunnel to right and... as you look back you cannot see our door, you continue mostly straight now for a ways... now the tunnel sweeps to the left, you follow wondering where it will lead, it straightens out again and in the distance you see a large wooden door with a big handle, you continue up to the door and reach for the handle, as you pull the door open, you find see your favorite kind of place, you walk through the door pulling it shut behind you, here you feel great, you feel safe and happy, it is your favorite kind of place, you walk forward a ways, now stop and look around, all the way around, notice what you see, what you smell, how it feels, just take it all in... now you sit down still just being glad to be here... take it in through your senses... you take another moment to take in this great place, this is your place, finally, you turn towards the door and walk towards it, grabbing the handle and pushing, now in the tunnel, you shut the door behind and head back down the tunnel, straight for a ways and then the broad turning to the right... straight again... and now turning to the left... ahead is the door to our classroom, you reach for the handle, open it and come in, you're back where you started. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Now everyone, close your eyes again and see the place you just were and touch your thumb to your index finger. Open your eyes. Look forward. So, now close your eyes and touch your fingers and see how quickly you can get back to your favorite safe and happy place. Give them a few seconds and then say open your eyes. Repeat this process a few more times until you believe they can do the process.

Invite the students to try “switching” outside of class. When they are experiencing stress, invite them to switch. The more they practice, the better they will get at regulating stress levels.

Summary and Implications

Recent research literature suggests that adolescents are experiencing increasing amounts of stress, especially during the months in which they attend school (APA, 2014; Jayson, 2014). It is important to be alert to the adverse effects that the stress response can have during the adolescent stage of brain development. While it is understood that varying amounts of stress may have beneficial psychosocial effects, it is imperative to also be aware that unchecked stress response in teens may lead to a variety of detrimental effects in the well-being of teens.

School counselors have a responsibility and opportunity to provide young people with an improved understanding of stress as well as various means to recognize, engage, and regulate it effectively. Even though school counseling programs were originally founded upon various models, they all included attention to the growth and well-being of young people during their school-aged years. Contemporary school counseling programs include a teaching or guidance component. As a teaching element, guidance curriculum provides the conduit through which counselors can help students gain current knowledge about the stress response, alter their attitude towards stress, and acquire competencies to regulate stress. It is empowering for them to learn that they can control or even diminish the detrimental effects of stress.

In providing a four-session unit on stress, it is our intention to offer school counselors, or other educators, a group of classroom presentations that fits into a busy academic schedule, provides key talking points, offers interesting activities for students, and concentrates on the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to manage stress. School counselors typically work within a framework of *prevention* and *early*

intervention, and refer outside of school for *treatment intervention*. This unit is meant to help students manage and regulate their stress at sufficient levels such that treatment intervention can be avoided. Students can learn the skills necessary to maintain a healthy well-being.

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