




# 1. TOO MUCH IS JUST AS BAD AS NOT ENOUGH! WHEN STRESS PLAYS TRICKS ON ME...

## Coping with my stress

Targeted competency(ies) (ÉKIP, WHO)	ADAPTATION AND STRESS MANAGEMENT
Cross-curricular competencies (QEP)	ACHIEVING THEIR POTENTIAL
General workshop objectives	<p>AT THE END OF THE WORKSHOP, THE STUDENT WILL BE ABLE TO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify the signs of a stressful situation</li> <li>• understand how stress affects them</li> <li>• learn new stress management strategies</li> </ul>

### Total duration

**60-MINUTE** version, follow all steps

**40-MINUTE** version, DO NOT facilitate activities marked with the  icon

### Materials and preparation

Print the *Stressful or not?* worksheet (1 per student)

Cut up small pieces of paper (1 per student) and place them in a container

\* Reuse the same pieces of paper for activity F

## A. Ready, set... improv! (15 minutes)

1. Announce that the workshop will start with a warm-up exercise: an improvisation.
  - Show the students the container and explain that it contains small slips of paper with each of their names written on them.
  - Tell the students that you will pick five names at random.
  - The people chosen will have to do a two-minute improv in front of the class on the challenges related to moving from elementary school to secondary school.
2. Before drawing the names, ask the students to close their eyes and take some time to reflect on (Forsyth and Eifert, 2007):
  - Their physical sensations: racing heart, sweaty palms, the shakes, irregular breathing, butterflies in their stomach, flushed cheeks, sweating, hot flashes, etc.
  - Their emotions: anxiety, fear, shyness, anger, excitement, happiness, anticipation, enjoyment, etc.
  - Their thoughts: "Oh, no, I'll never be able to do this!," "Awesome! I love improv!," etc.
3. Ask them to open their eyes again and pretend to start drawing names, to create some suspense... Then—SURPRISE!—tell them it was just a joke and they won't be doing improv.
4. Ask the students to again focus on their physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts.
5. Then ask for volunteers to share their reactions to the fake improv activity with the rest of the class. Lead a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - How did you feel when I said we'd be doing an improv activity? (Prompt the students to name their physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts).
  - Why do you think everyone had different sensations, emotions, and thoughts?
  - What is the point of these reactions? What message do they send you?
6. Explain that all the reactions listed in the previous step (sensations, emotions, thoughts) are **signs of stress**. Ask the students:
  - Why is it important to recognize your signs of stress? How can recognizing them help you in your life?



Finish by explaining that the more aware we are of **our signs of stress**, the easier we can **identify** stressful situations and find strategies to **accept and cope with the stress**. But the less sensitive we are to these signs, the more stress is likely to build up (Ciarrochi, Hayes and Bailey, 2014).

## B. Video: Nadège and stress – Part 1

### C. Stress... Good or bad? (10 minutes)

1. Referring to the video, remind the students that stress is a **normal alarm reaction to a real, concrete situation**. It allows us to react appropriately when faced with danger.



Echo what Nadège said: If you come face to face with a bear, stress is justified, useful, and essential to your survival. *“It gets you moving so you can protect yourself. If you don’t feel stress and you simply continue on your way without worrying about the bear, then you’ll be in danger.”*

2. Reinvest the following theoretical elements to encourage a discussion with the students:



**No stress or too little stress** can cause you to under-react, let down your guard, or not notice something dangerous about a specific situation. Can you think of an example where a lack of stress led to negative consequences (e.g., not studying hard enough for a test)?

On the other hand, when you’re faced with **excessive stress**, such as **cumulative stress** (e.g., a move on top of your parents’ divorcing in the middle of your final exams), **prolonged stress** (e.g., family arguments that drag on for long periods of time), or **too much stress** (e.g., a situation of abuse or bullying), it can affect your inner balance. Can you think of examples where you were under too much stress?

A **good level of stress (just enough, not too much, not too little)** can motivate you and even help you do better. Can you think of times when stress was helpful to you (e.g., before a test, helping you to stay focused on studying; before a competition, giving you the energy to train or the adrenaline to perform, etc.)?

3. Come back to Nadège’s stressful situation related to her math test. How stressed do you think Nadège felt about her math test? (not enough, too much, or just enough?)
4. Wrap up the discussion by briefly introducing the inverted stress curve (Palazollo and Arnaud, 2013), which underlines the title of the workshop: Too much (*stress*) is just as bad as not enough (*stress*): it throws off our inner balance and sense of well-being. But an optimal amount of stress is both necessary and good for us.



## D. Body break (5 minutes)

1. Explain that after exercising their brain cells, they need a break to move around and take a few deep breaths. The students can do the exercises sitting or standing. The movements are done in time with their inhales and exhales, and each movement is repeated for about 1-2 minutes.



Moving and stretching while focusing on your breathing can help you relax, calm down, and manage your stress better. Use this strategy whenever you feel the need. You can do it anywhere, discreetly, even during a test.

- Torso curves: seated or standing. Back straight. Inhale, expanding your chest, and exhale, rounding your back.
- Shoulder shrugs: seated. Back straight and arms at your side. Inhale, slowly raising your shoulders toward your ears; exhale, releasing your shoulders quickly.
- Head movements: seated. Tilt your head toward your shoulder, like you were trying to touch the ceiling with your ear. Repeat three times on each side. Then move your head slowly in half-circles from shoulder to shoulder.

## E. Our brain plays tricks on us (10 minutes)

1. Explain to the students that even though it's "normal" to feel stressed, sometimes our brain plays tricks on us—like reacting to certain stressful situations as though we were face to face with a bear instead of the tiny ant that's actually in front of us. And that's a huge waste of energy!
2. Hand out the *Stressful or not?* worksheet, and ask the students to rate each of the following situations based on this question:

"Would you compare this situation to an ant (a mostly stress-free situation), a mouse (a pretty stressful situation), or a bear (a very stressful situation)?"

Encourage them to write their answers on the worksheet.



- A final math exam
- An argument with a teacher
- A breakup
- Drawing a blank during an oral presentation
- Hanging out with your new group of friends for the first time
- An argument with your best friend
- Your first day at a new high school
- Being late for class
- Not being able to find your friends in the cafeteria


3. Lead a discussion with the whole group. Which answer did you circle most often: bear, mouse, or ant? Or was it mostly even, depending on the situation? What does this tell you about yourself? Ask for volunteers to share their answers.



The idea is to make the students aware that they sometimes need to put their stress into perspective. If you tend to react to most stressful situations like you're standing in front of a bear, then your emotional response is out of proportion to what's actually going on. This can be exhausting in the long run, and really take a toll on you.

On the other hand, if you mostly react like you've just seen a tiny ant, your emotional response is also out of proportion. You may be detached or apathetic, or even tend to put yourself in dangerous situations.

The math test, as experienced by Nadège in the video, is a good example of a "mouse" situation. It should cause enough stress to get you moving (into the performance zone), without causing you to freeze.

4.  Conclude by asking the students about times when they had a "bear" reaction when the situation actually called for an "ant" or a "mouse" reaction instead.

## F. Your turn (15 minutes)

1. Give each student a slip of paper. Ask them to write down a situation they find stressful. Reassure them that they don't need to write their names; the exercise is anonymous.
2. Collect the papers and put them in a container. Mix them up, then pick a dozen or so and read them aloud. For schools that only have 40 minutes, cut the number of situations in half.
3. For each situation, ask the students if they know any strategies for dealing with the stressful situation while still taking care of themselves.
4. As needed, complete the strategies proposed by the students with the following list (Lupien, 2019; Marchand *et al.*, 2018):
  - do something
  - exercise
  - listen to music that calms me down
  - talk to someone about my stress, get help
  - meditate or do relaxation exercises
  - have fun with my friends
  - watch a TV show I like
  - draw, paint, sculpt, create something
  - take a walk, get outside
  - practise breathing techniques: see apps
  - do a mindfulness exercise
  - take a step back, put things in perspective
  - practise positive self-talk, be kind and compassionate with yourself





## **G. Video: Nadège and stress – Part 2 and REMINDER: HORS-PISTE challenge**

This week, encourage students to pay attention to their signs of stress (physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts). If they find themselves in a stressful situation over the next few days, tell them to pick one or two strategies for dealing with their stress.

**Printable worksheet**  
*Stressful or not?*

A final math exam



An argument with a teacher



A breakup



Drawing a blank during an oral presentation



Hanging out with your new group of friends for the first time



An argument with your best friend



Your first day at a new high school



Being late for class



Not being able to find your friends in the cafeteria

