

In my face... or in my head? Distinguishing stress from anxiety

Target competency	Manage one’s emotions and stress effectively
Cross-curricular competency (QEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperate with others
General objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the notions of stress and anxiety Use mindfulness to calm oneself



REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS WORKSHOP

Remember, in the last workshop, we talked about various sources of stress. Do you remember the challenge I gave you? Tell me how you did it.

* The challenge was to find a way to calm yourself down when you’re in a stressful situation.

IN THE LIVES OF LEO AND CHARLIE

Evening has fallen on Camp OFF-TRAIL. Sitting around the fire, Leo and Charlie are listening to Miss Nathalie and Miss Catherine talk about the long hike they'll be taking the next day.

Miss Nathalie says: “Tomorrow morning, we'll all be climbing Mount Jacques-Cartier! We're going all the way to the summit! This is the first time we've done a student expedition on this scale.”

Full of enthusiasm, Miss Catherine continues: “We've chosen to give you this experience to represent the end of your primary education and all the important things you've learned. Once you've reached the summit, you'll have to make your way back down. So, when you've completed one stage, there are still other roads to travel... like when you move on to high school.”

Everyone looks super excited, except Leo and Charlie. Their thoughts begin to race through their heads.

Charlie decides to break the ice first and share her feelings with Leo: “This information doesn't reassure me at all. I have a lump in my throat and my stomach’s in a knot. I feel like it's going to be far too difficult and I'll never make it.”

Leo confides: “I don't feel good either. My hands are clammy and they’re shaking a little. Why do we feel this way? What's the matter with us?”

DID YOU KNOW?

There's a wide variation in physical and psychological maturity among pupils reaching the end of their elementary school career. Some of these discrepancies can be a source of stress for students. For example, being the tallest or shortest in the class can cause stress.

On the other hand, adolescence is also a time of many changes that can lead to stress. Puberty with its hormonal changes, and relationships with friends, family and various authority figures, as well as cultural and social expectations all weigh heavily on a student's stress level. The transition to secondary school is generally a stressful period, with changing points of reference, a different school environment and the student's appropriation of independence.

To help students get through this period more easily, it's important to help them acquire stress management techniques, formulate clear and realistic demands and expectations, provide support and encouragement, and help them recognize their strengths.

(Tummers, 2011)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the students the following questions:
 - What do you think is happening to Charlie and Leo?
 - What do their physical sensations mean?
2. If the students don't mention it, you can point out that these sensations can be associated with stress or anxiety. Then, ask the students:
 - What do you think is the difference between stress and anxiety?
3. Present the explanatory video [The fear of fear itself... When anxiety takes over](#). Please note that part 2 of the video may continue automatically, but you can stop it at the end of part 1. If the subtitles are too fast, you can reduce the speed of the video. After viewing it, ask the students to summarize what they understood, supplementing where necessary with information from the *Stress or Anxiety?* worksheet. You can also tell the students that this is a special preview, because this video is also shown to high school students.
4. Now, ask them to work in teams of three or four and give out the two-page *Stress or Anxiety?* handout to each student. Ask the teams to classify the six scenarios according to whether they involve stress or anxiety.
5. Once the exercise is complete, bring the students back together as a large group. Draw two columns on the board: stress and anxiety. Take up the six situations suggested in the handout and invite the teams to share their rankings. Reclassify them as necessary, recalling the theoretical concepts covered in the explanatory video and the handout.
 - Stress: situations 2, 3 and 5
 - Anxiety: situations 1, 4 and 6
6. Complete this exercise by pointing out that, basically, a simple way to distinguish between stress and anxiety is to ask yourself the following question: "The situation that's making me feel bad or weird inside, is it in my face or in my head?" Remind the students: if the situation is in your head and not in front of you (i.e., you're worrying about something that hasn't happened and imagining the worst), you're probably experiencing anxiety.
7. Explain to the students that, as they saw in the previous workshop, there are many ways of calming down in stressful or anxious situations. Suggest that they try one together by performing the following mindfulness meditation:

https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HPp1_6.2_stress-ix.mp3



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CHALLENGE

Suggest the following challenge:

- Between now and the next OFF-TRAIL workshop, try using a meditation exercise if you feel you're experiencing stress or anxiety. You can find all kinds on YouTube.



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ENABLING REINVESTMENT

As a way of reinvesting what has been learned, you could schedule a daily “quiet time” (at recess or lunchtime, for example) and suggest that students use a strategy of their choice (meditation, self-massage, breathing, drawing, reading, etc.) to calm down, before returning to teaching activities. During these moments of relaxation, you can also have the students try out the meditations available at the following address : <https://www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog/?srsltid=AfmBOooBt8Z3JEHswU884MZ3m8koK6I1or69ZFtAoF-koUrwGfQEck4W>

READING SUGGESTIONS

- Hébert, A. (2023). *Anxiety as Told to Children*. Éditions de Mortagne.



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HANDOUT TO PRINT

Stress or anxiety?

Stress

Did you know that stress is a normal reaction and that it's even useful to you? If you go for a walk in the forest and meet a bear, I hope you'll experience a little stress, because that'll be telling you not to go near the bear to pet it.

You can think of stress as the energy your body releases to give you the strength and courage to overcome difficult situations. For example, when you have to give an oral presentation in front of the whole class, your hands may be sweaty, your heart may be beating faster and you may be afraid of making a mistake. If this happens to you, it's normal. If it doesn't happen to you, that's okay too. Just try to understand these sensations as something positive. Stop for a moment and remember that it's your body trying to tell you that you're strong and brave, that you can do it.

Keep in mind, too, that it's constant stress or too much stress that can affect you negatively. Stress can become uncomfortable or overwhelming when it occurs on a regular, daily basis (for example, if your parents fight all the time), when you experience several stresses at the same time (for example, if you have an exam, you've been fighting with your friend and your parents tell you that you're moving) or when it's too intense (for example, if you're being bullied or assaulted). That's when it's important to use strategies to learn how to live with it and manage it better.

Anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. That's normal. But what is it, really? Anxiety is like stress that has no specific source, is exaggerated, or is a figment of your imagination. Anxiety is when you worry about something that hasn't happened and you imagine the worst is going to happen. It's a kind of "fear of being afraid." It's a bit like looking at a little kitten and seeing it as that big, dangerous bear we were talking about earlier, you know?

It's normal to feel a little anxious before an exam or an important project. What becomes problematic is imagining that your life is completely ruined because you got a bad mark on that exam. Anxiety becomes worrying when it takes up a lot of space, persists over time, prevents you from doing activities, when you have no idea what's really stressing you, or when it leads to suffering. If this happens, don't hesitate to talk about it with someone you trust, and remember to use all the tools you've acquired over the years to make you feel good.

(Lupien, 2019; McGonigal, 2013; Tel-jeunes, 2020; Yerkes and Dodson, 1908)

Scenarios

1	Your teacher informs you that you'll have to make an oral presentation in two weeks' time on a topic of your choice. You don't really like talking in front of the class because you're a very shy person. You know you'll be thinking about this presentation non-stop until it happens. You can already see yourself stammering and having a memory lapse. You're sure you'll be laughed at...
2	You felt fine when you got up. It was a beautiful sunny day and you couldn't wait to get to school. But then your teacher suddenly announces that you'll be doing a surprise math test this morning. You feel your heart start to beat very fast. You have a lot of difficulty in this subject and you're afraid of failing.
3	You and your parents are currently at the open house of the high school you're supposed to attend next year. You wander off to explore some of the kiosks. Suddenly, you realize you can't see your parents anymore. No matter how hard you look, you can't find them. Your heart starts pounding and your hands get all sweaty.
4	The open house went pretty well, after all! But you know that next year, you'll have to go to this school every day, with those big sec. 5's. You're worried about what's going to happen. You're afraid you'll get lost in the school, that you won't be able to make new friends and that you'll end up alone. Your thoughts are all over the place. The more you think about it, the worse you feel inside.
5	You're in your room doing your homework. You can hear your parents talking in the kitchen. The tone rises. They seem to be arguing. You hear the front door slam. You wonder what's going on and you can't concentrate on your homework.
6	Recently, you had a big conflict with your best friend. You've made up, but you're still worried about losing them. You're afraid you'll be seeing more of this kind of conflict in the future. To prevent this from happening again, you avoid confronting them and do whatever they want.