



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

Coping with my stress

Targeted competencies (based on ÉKIP and the WHO)	Managing emotions, stress and anxiety Self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-worth
Content for the development of personal and social competencies (MEQ)¹	Sheet 13 : Making friends and social network Sheet 14 : Inclusion and getting along
Cross-cutting competency (QEP)	Achieving their potential
General objectives of the workshop	By the end of the workshop, students will be able to: • Recognize their signs of stress; • Understand what stress is and its purpose; • Better understand their own reactions to stress; • Use new strategies to manage their stress.

Total duration

60-MINUTE version: follow ALL steps, including the ones marked with the icon 

40-MINUTE version: DO NOT do activities marked with the icon 

Materials and preparation

- Print the worksheet (1 per student): *Stressful or not?*
- Print the *Physical Sensations* and *Managing Stress* posters available on the [website](#) in the section: First cycle / Workshops and tools for students / Classroom posters to support your explanations and reinvest learning in class.
- Bring small cut pieces of paper (1 per student), placed in a container.
 - Reuse these same pieces of paper for activity F
- Have a chalkboard or interactive whiteboard (IWB) available.

¹ Please note that this workshop also introduces content corresponding to [Sheet 18](#), for 9th grade students, to anticipate future learning.

Financial contribution:



Public Health
Agency of Canada

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A. Ready, set... improv! (5–10 minutes)

1. Announce that the workshop will start with a warm-up exercise—an improvisation!
 - Show the students the container and explain that inside are small slips of paper, each with a student's name on it.
 - Tell the students that you're going to pick five names at random.
 - The chosen students will have to do a two-minute improv in front of the class on the challenges of moving from elementary to high school.
2. Before drawing the names, have the students close their eyes if they want to. Ask them the following questions (Forsyth & Eifert, 2007, 2025)
 - What physical sensations do you feel? (e.g., racing heart, sweaty palms, shaking, irregular breathing, butterflies in their stomach, tight throat, sweating, feeling hot, etc.).
 - What emotions are you experiencing? (e.g., surprise, discomfort, fear, embarrassment, anger, excitement, joy, eagerness, pleasure, etc.).
 - What thoughts are going through your mind? (e.g. "Oh, no, I'll never be able to do this!" "Great! I love improv!" etc.).
3. Ask them to open their eyes again and then pretend to start drawing names, to create some suspense, then... SURPRISE! Tell them it was just a joke and they won't be doing an improv.
4. Ask the students to focus on their physical sensations, emotions and thoughts now.
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:
 - What did you experience 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 in the class didn't have the same sensations, emotions and thoughts?
 - What is the purpose of these reactions? What message do they send you?
6. Explain that what they felt during the fake improv (sensations, emotions and 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 everyday life?
7. Round out their answers with the following information:



The more aware we are of **our signs of stress**, the more easily we can **identify** situations that cause us stress and find strategies to **accept and manage it**. But the less sensitive we are to these signs, the more stress is likely to build up (Ciarrochi et al., 2014; Wassner & Sedley, 2024).

B. Educational clip - Part 1 (5 minutes)

1. Play the video clip *When stress plays tricks on me – Part 1* for your students.

[Video clip – Part 1](#)



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C. Stress... Good or bad? (5–10 minutes)

1. Referring to the video content, 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.
2. Ask the students to explain what they understood from the video, and then complement their answers with the following information if necessary:

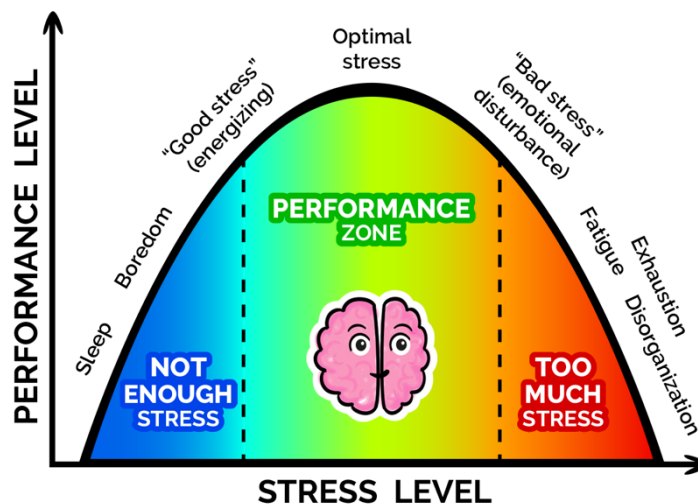


No stress or **too little stress** can cause us to fail to perceive the presence of danger in a situation, to let down our guard, and to under-react.

On the other hand, when we're faced with **excessive stress**, such as **cumulative stress** (e.g., a move in addition to your parents' separation, in the middle of your final exams), **prolonged stress** (e.g., family arguments that drag on for long periods of time, or a loved one dealing with a chronic disease), or **too much stress** (e.g., traumatic event or situation of abuse or bullying), it can affect our inner balance (health, wellbeing, and performance).

Of course, sometimes we have no control over the external events and circumstances that cause us stress. But remember that a **good level of stress (just enough, not too much, not too little)** can motivate us and even help us do better.

3. Briefly introduce the inverted stress curve (Beerendonk et al., 2024; Palazzolo & Arnaud, 2013), which effectively illustrates 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.



4.  Ask them the following questions:
 - Can you think of any examples of situations where a lack of stress played against you (e.g., not studying hard enough for a test)?
 - Can you think of examples of situations where you were under too much stress?
 - Can you think of situations where 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.)?

D. Active break (5 minutes)

1. Explain that after exercising their brain cells, it's time 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 inhale and exhale, and each movement is repeated for about 1 or 2 minutes.
 - Torso movement: seated or standing, back straight. Breathe in, filling your chest. Exhale, rounding your back.
 - Shrugs: seated, with back straight and arms at your side. Inhale, slowly raising your shoulders toward your ears; exhale, letting your shoulders quickly drop down.
 - Head movements: seated. Gently lean your head toward your shoulder, as if reaching your other ear toward the ceiling. Repeat three times on each side. Then move your head slowly in half-circles, from one shoulder to another.
2. Conclude by explaining that:



Moving and stretching while focusing on our breathing can help us relax, calm down and better manage our stress. This is a good strategy to use whenever we feel the need. It can be done anywhere, discreetly, even during a test.

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

1. Explain to the students that even though it's "normal" to feel stress, sometimes our brain plays tricks on us. An example would be 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?* printable worksheet, and then present the following situations:

- A final math exam;
- An argument with your parents;
- Drawing a blank during an oral presentation;
- An argument with your best friend;
- Your first day at your new high school;
- Being late to class;
- Eating alone in the cafeteria;
- Getting negative comments on social media;
- Losing someone close to you.



3. Ask them to answer the following question by circling the correct number on the printable worksheet.

How stressful is each situation for you (small ant: low or no stress / big bear: very stressful / somewhere in between: a moderately stressful situation)?

4. Now lead a discussion with the whole group using the following questions:
 - What do you notice about your worksheet?
 - Which did you circle most often: bear, ant or somewhere in between?
 - Or was it mostly even, depending on the situation?
 - What does this tell you about yourself?

5. Round out their answers with the following information. The idea here is to bring students to better observe their reactions to stress and to realize that sometimes **stress needs to be put into perspective** in a given situation:



If you tend to react to most stressful situations like you're standing in front of a bear, then **your emotional response is probably overblown**. This can be exhausting in the long run, and really take a toll on you.

Similarly, if you tend to react to most stressful situations like you're standing in front of a tiny ant, then **your emotional response is probably not adjusted to the situation**. You may be detached or apathetic, or even tend to put yourself in dangerous situations.

An exam is a good example of a situation that should fall somewhere in between (neither bear nor ant). It should cause enough stress to get you moving (into the performance zone), without causing you to freeze.

6. If time permits, conclude by asking students for examples of situations where their reactions to stress were not appropriate to the circumstances (either too much or too little stress).

F. Your turn (10–15 minutes)

1.  Give each student a small piece of paper. Ask them to write down a situation they find stressful. Reassure them that the exercise is anonymous.

2.  Collect the pieces of paper and put them in a container. Mix them up, then pick a dozen or so and read them out loud.

3.  For each situation, ask the students to name strategies that could be used to manage their stress without avoiding the situation. You can also ask students whether this is a situation they have control over, or not. Depending on the situation, ask them if the same strategies should be used (e.g., in the case of parents' separation vs. missing the bus).

For schools that only have 40 minutes, you can simply ask the students to name the strategies they use to manage their stress.

4. Round out the strategies suggested by the students with the following list, inspired by **Strategies to manage stress**:

- Stop, take a break;
- Take a step back, put things in perspective, see the situation differently;
- Do a breathing exercise;
- Play soft, gentle music;
- Take a warm bath or a relaxing shower;
- Do some yoga;
- Practise mindfulness;
- Exercise or do a sport;
- Do an artistic or creative activity (drawing, painting, sculpting, singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, etc.);
- Write in a diary or journal;
- Get in touch with nature: walk in the forest, visit a lake, do some gardening;
- Spend some time with an animal that makes you feel good;
- See friends, surround yourself with people;
- Confide in someone, ask for help.



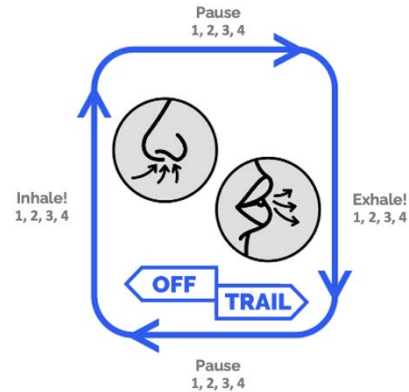
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- Now suggest that the students try a breathing exercise. Explain that there are many different types, but today you will be trying **box breathing**. Explain that breathing is automatic: it happens all the time, without our having to think about it. However, when we experience stress or strong emotions, our breathing speeds up and our heart tends to beat faster. By controlling the pace of our breathing, we can help our heart return to a normal rhythm. And we feel calmer as a result.
- Practise the **box breathing** technique with the students, using the image in the slideshow. You can count out loud to help students follow the pace.



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G. Educational clip - Part 2 (5 minutes)

- Play the video clip *When stress plays tricks on me – Part 2* for your students.
[Video clip – Part 2](#)

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H. OFF-TRAIL challenge

This week, encourage students to manage their stress. If they encounter a stressful situation in the coming days, invite them to: 1) Identify their stress level (ant, bear or somewhere in between?); 2) Pay attention to their signs of stress (physical sensations, emotions and thoughts); and 3) Try one or two strategies to manage their stress, without avoiding it.

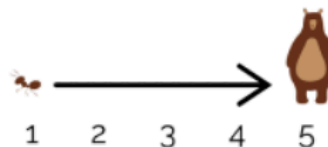
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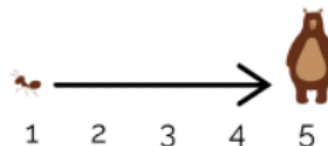
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PRINTABLE WORKSHEET
Stressful or not?

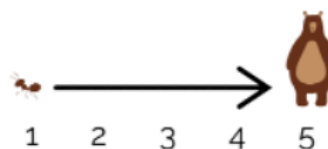
A final exam in mathematics



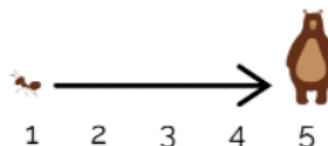
An argument with your parents



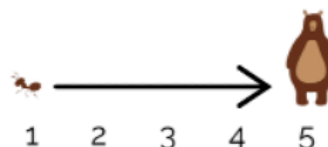
Drawing a blank during an oral presentation



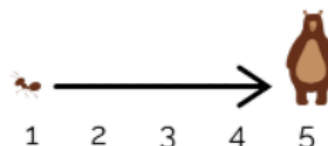
A conflict with your best friend



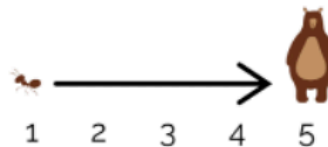
Arriving at your new high school



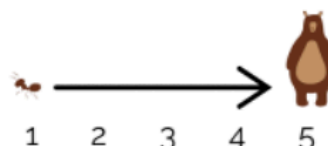
Being late to class



Eating alone at the cafeteria



Getting negative comments on social media



Losing someone close to you

