



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING STRESS

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may be in need of support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider the context of the situation, individual differences, and cultural and linguistic factors.*

Teachers are an important part of establishing and maintaining healthy environments for students to learn and grow. Avoiding students who display signs of stress does not help them in any way. Teachers play an important role in guiding students suffering from excessive stress to professionals in the building who can be of assistance. Teachers can assist students who are expressing stress by providing emotional support, promoting positive peer relationships, and connecting students with other professionals in the school who may be helpful resources.

WHAT IS STRESS?

- Stress is the body's emotional, physical, or behavioral response to environmental change.
- Stress can be a short-term reaction in response to an upcoming event, such as homework deadlines, an upcoming exam, or speaking in front of the class. Stress can also result from traumatic or ongoing experiences, such as coping with parents' divorce, public health crises, natural disasters, or community violence, as well as adapting to different cultural or social expectations or values.
- Some amount of stress is beneficial and can motivate students to perform better.
- Too much stress can be harmful, even if it is associated with sowing the seeds for a positive event (e.g., academic/sports competition or going to college).

Left unaddressed, the negative effects of stress can disrupt a student's behavior, physical and emotional well-being, school success, and friendships.

HOW MIGHT STRESS BE EXPRESSED BY STUDENTS IN SCHOOL?

- **Students of any age** can show the responses to excessive stress as described below. However, some responses are more commonly seen at certain ages. What a teacher might perceive as a minimal stress or even positive stressor may not be viewed similarly by the student. Refrain from making judgments about how much stress the student "should" be able to handle.
- **Pre-K and kindergarten** students may complain of stomach or headaches, experience incontinence, become clingier, or start habits like hair twirling or thumb-sucking.
- **Elementary** students may cry easily, take frequent trips to the bathroom or school nurse, have difficulty staying in their seats, or become irritable. On the one hand, some students may become angry, oppositional, or defiant and have disruptive outbursts. On the other hand, some students may laugh excessively.
- **Middle school** students may express worry, show anxiety, or feel isolated or lonely. On the one hand, some students may become angry, oppositional, or defiant and have disruptive outbursts. On the other hand, some students may laugh excessively.
- **High school** students may isolate themselves, give up easily when frustrated, react with strong emotions (e.g., anger, hostility), or adopt new and negative coping mechanisms. What is stressful to one student may not be equally stressful to another.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Listen, express understanding and (if appropriate) concern, and offer help. For example, "I notice you seem a bit stressed (or worried or distracted) lately. Is there something I can help you work through?"	Avoid or ignore the student, express displeasure, or make judgments.
Offer ways for students to cope. A "peace area" in your room where students can quietly reflect or engage in calming activities can help. Young students may enjoy tactile activities (e.g., Zen Garden, calming jar, Buddha Board, blowing a pinwheel). Older students may respond well to writing in a journal or meditating.	Automatically send the student away (e.g., to the principal's office).
Speak to the student privately (but with the door open if you are in a physical space).	Address or share the student's behavior publicly.
Remind students you care about their academic and social success. For example, "I care about you, and I know the great work you're capable of." Be mindful not to exacerbate their stress if it appears to be related to academic performance.	Ignore or avoid the student and the issue.
Confer with colleagues who also work closely with the student. This may reveal a fuller picture of the issue and help determine if the behaviors are persistent in other classes, between classes, or during extra-curricular activities as well.	Gossip about the student's behavior.
Continue to monitor the student. If they continue to demonstrate stress-based behaviors for an extended period of time, or the behaviors reemerge after seeming to have abated, consult with the school counselor regarding introducing stronger support resource opportunities.	Assume that if the stress-based behaviors diminish or appear to have disappeared, that they might not return or be retriggered.

REFER STUDENTS TO FURTHER HELP IF NEEDED.

- Review your school policy for seeking student support.
- Contact school counselors, psychologists, social workers and other personnel with any questions, suggestions, concerns, or resources.

LINKS TO RESOURCES:

Stress & Mindfulness

- KidsHealth in the Classroom (bit.ly/3AQ9y6A)
- 6 Simple Ways To Reduce Student Stress In The Classroom (bit.ly/3CX51Bc)
- Take the Time: Mindfulness for Kids (apa.org/pubs/magination/441B056)

Peace Areas

- Peace Corner: Creating Safe Space for Reflection (youtube.com/watch?v=dxBv1w4SQyw)
- Creating a Peace Place (bit.ly/2OyG7NI)

Child Development

- How Kids Experience Stress (bit.ly/3yUF2YC)
- The Science of Childcare Social Emotional Development (bit.ly/3AUcu1W)

Related Mental Health Primers

Low Self-Compassion and Perceived Competence, Crisis, Sadness

LOCAL RESOURCES:
