

MODULE 6

Preparation

The Importance of Positive Mental Health

Overview

What constitutes a mentally healthy person? Does being mentally healthy mean not having negative emotions? What does the word “stress” mean and how can we re-think the common perception that all stress is bad for our mental health? Are the strategies that we use to achieve good mental health mostly different or mostly the same as those we use to achieve good physical health?

Learning Objectives

In this lesson students will:

- Learn about what the stress response is and how to use it to help develop resilience
- Learn when to apply stress reduction techniques and what kinds of stress reduction techniques can be helpful
- Learn and apply activities designed to enhance both mental and physical health

Major Concepts Addressed

- Everyone has mental health even if a person has a mental illness
- Learning what the stress response is and how to use it can help a person better adapt to life and develop resilience
- Strategies that we use to develop good mental health are very similar to those we use to develop good physical health

Teacher Background and Preparation

- Read through all activities and handouts before class
- Review the Kelly McGonigal TED Talk, *How to make stress your friend*, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>) and ensure you understand and can explain the handouts that will be provided to students (note that there is BOTH a teacher and student version of Handout 6.2)

Activities

- Activity 1: Understanding the Stress Response (25 min.)
- Activity 2: Challenging our Thinking (10 min.)
- Activity 3: Reviewing Useful Strategies for Modulating the Intensity of the Stress Response (10 min.)
- Activity 4 - Optional Activity: *Taking Charge of My Health (homework)*

In Advance

- Photocopy handouts 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 for each student
- Set up projection equipment to play the Kelly McGonigal TED Talk video
- Cut out “Coping with Stress” cards and place in an easily accessible location in the classroom
- Prepare video ready link to <https://gearpatrol.com/2017/02/02/box-breathing-navy-seals/>
- Photocopy “Box Breathing” card for each student

Materials Required

- Projection capability for classroom viewing of the Kelly McGonigal TED Talk video
- Handouts 6.1 and 6.2 (Note: for Handout 6.2 there is BOTH a teachers version and students version, please ensure you give students the student version of the handout)
- Challenging Our Thinking cards
- Coping with Stress cards
- Box Breathing cards
- Flip chart, flip chart paper, paper, pens, tape

Useful Self-Education

Carl Cederström and André Spicer
The Wellness Syndrome (Book, 2015)

JSTOR Daily: The False Promises of Wellness Culture
<https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/>

Ruby Tandoh: The Unhealthy Truth Behind ‘Wellness’ and ‘Clean Eating’
www.vice.com/en_us/article/jm5nvp/ruby-tandoh-eat-clean-wellness

MODULE 6

Activity #1

Understanding the Stress Response (25 minutes)

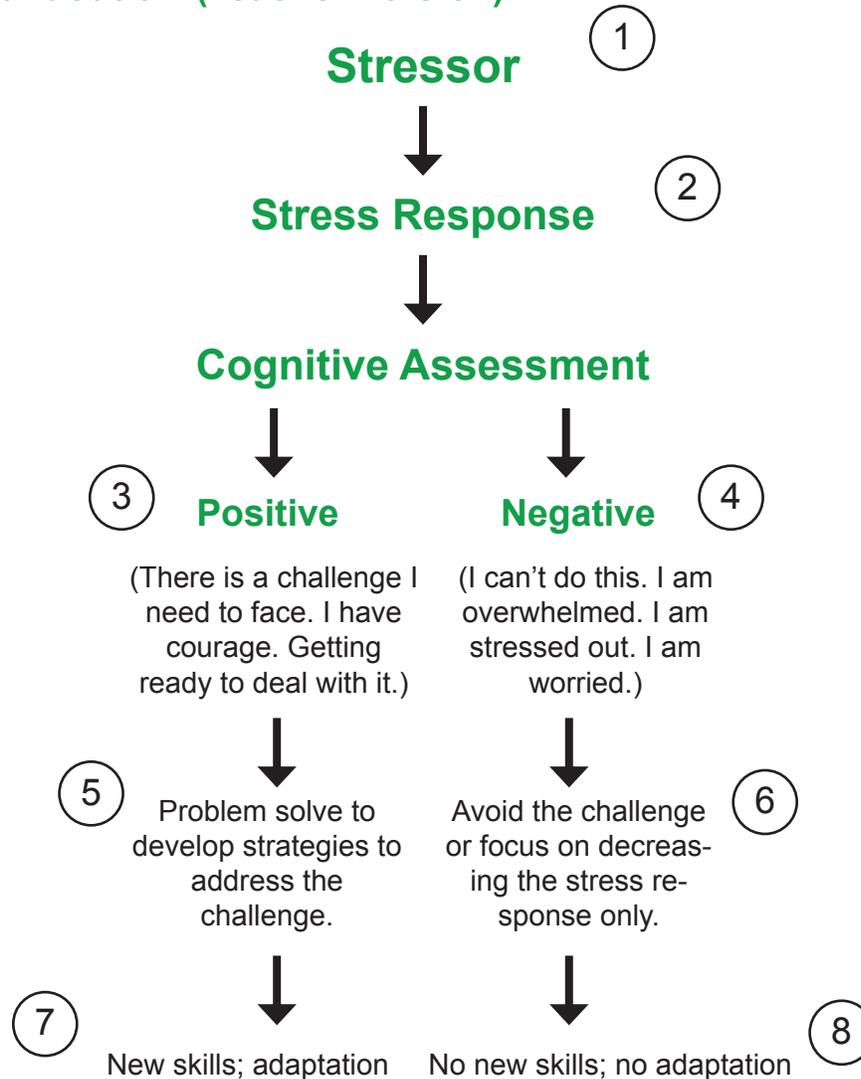
Purpose:

- To help students understand the stress response and its purpose (to alert persons to a challenge in their environment that must be addressed).
- To help students understand that successfully solving the challenge they are facing will both eliminate the stress response and will leave them with skills they can apply in future challenging situations. This is called building resilience.
- To help students better adapt to the usual challenges of life.

How-to:

- 1) Ask students to write down on a piece of paper what they think of when they hear the word “stress”.
- 2) Collect the pieces of paper and save for later in the lesson.
- 3) Distribute Handout 6.1 to all the students and explain what it demonstrates – focus on the negative impact of avoidance (enhances intensity of subsequent stress responses) during the stress response and the positive impact of persistence (decreases intensity of subsequent stress responses) during the stress response.
- 4) Play the Kelly McGonigal TED Talk, *How to make stress your friend*, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>). During the video summarize item 1 responses into negative and positive categories (calculate numbers in each category). After the video is completed, provide a forum for class discussion. Some suggested topics: What did the presenter say that was different from what you have believed about stress? What did you take away from the presentation that you can use in your own life?
- 5) Distribute Handout 6.2 (make sure you give the students their version of this handout and that you have reviewed the teachers version of this handout) to all the students and explain what it demonstrates. Focus on the importance of cognitive “explanation” of the stress response and how two types of intervention (one – use cognitive techniques to help solve the problem that the stress response has identified; two – use stress modulation techniques to help decrease the intensity of the stress response) can be used. BOTH are necessary. Distribute Handout 6.3 which provides a step by step approach.
- 6) Now that they have been exposed to the handouts and have seen the video, ask students to write down on another piece of paper what they think of when they hear the word “stress”. Collect the pieces of paper.
- 7) Ask the students to write a short paragraph describing a time when they successfully dealt with a stress response that they experienced (for example: an examination, a social situation, a conflict with someone, etc.) in a way the video suggests doing. Let your students know that this is meant to be a private activity and will not be shared with classmates. During this activity summarize item 6 responses into negative and positive categories (calculate numbers in each category) and post outcomes from item 1 and item 6 responses on a flip-chart that all students can see.
- 8) Report to the class on the differences in the numbers of responses in negative and positive categories between activity 1 and activity 6. Lead an open discussion on why these differences occurred and on what the class has learned about the stress response and how they can apply what they have learned.

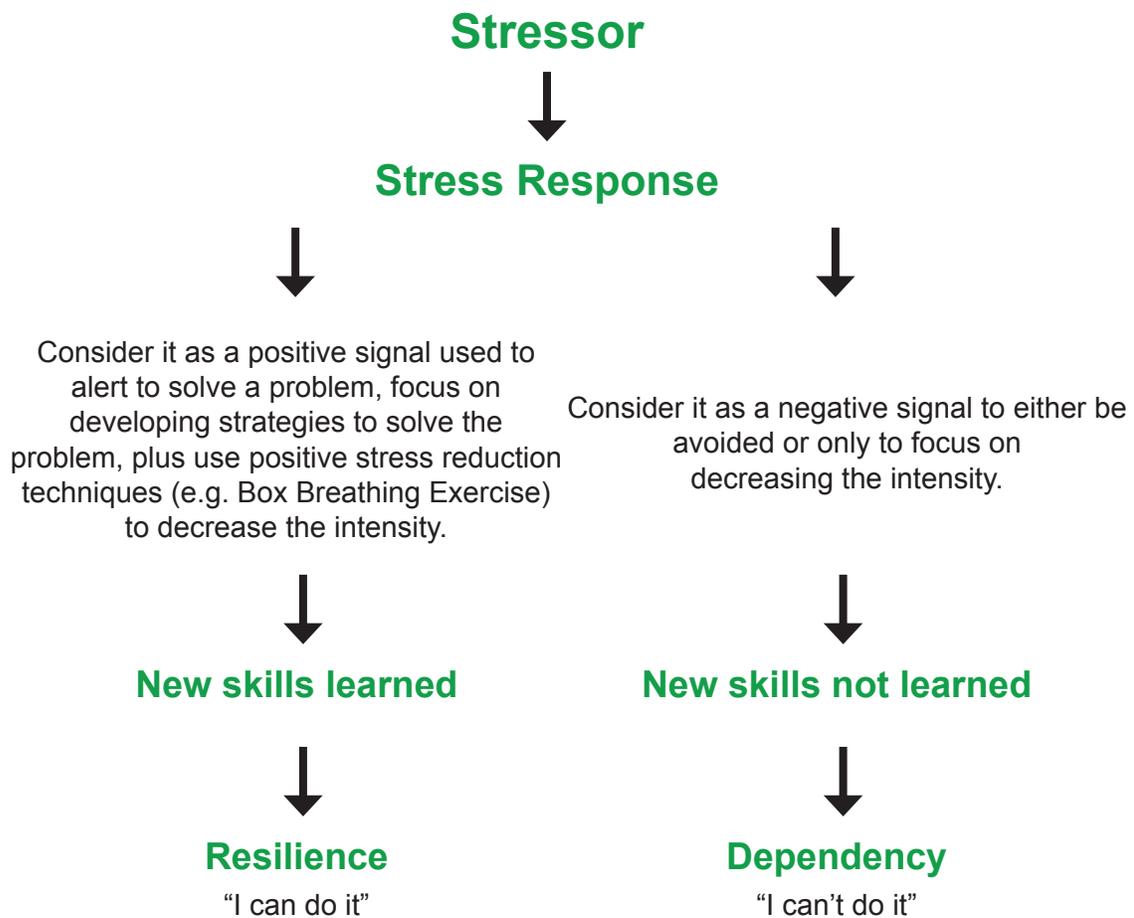
Explanation of Handout 6.1 (Teacher Version)



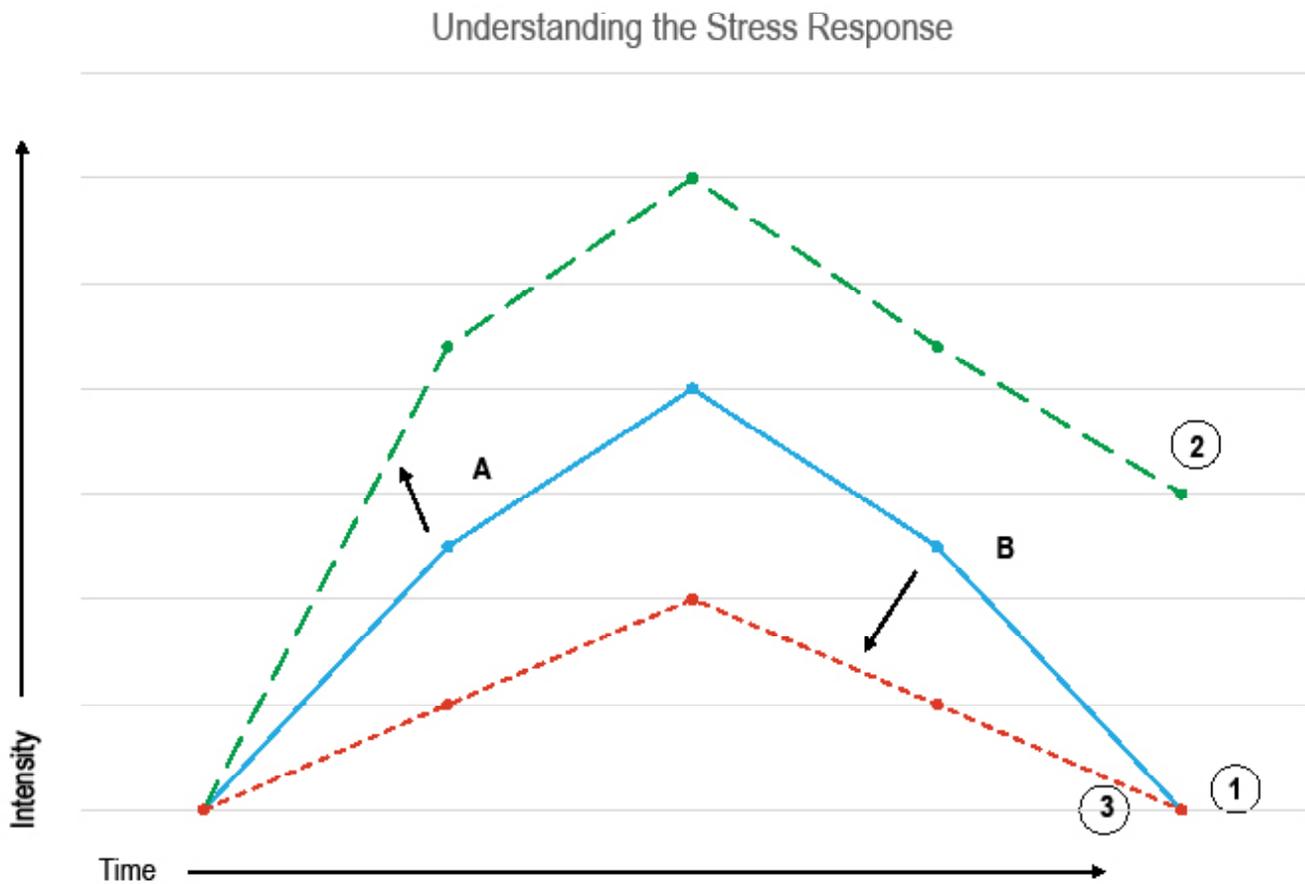
- 1) A challenge occurs in our environment (e.g. an upcoming exam).
- 2) We experience various “symptoms” (e.g. heart racing, rapid breathing, tension, etc.).
- 3) We understand this experience as a signal telling us we have a problem to solve.
- 4) We understand this experience as a signal telling us we have a problem we cannot solve.
- 5) We seek out solutions/strategies to help us solve the problem (e.g. study, ask for help, apply interventions designed to decrease intensity of the stress response).
- 6) We retreat, avoid and place focus on applying interventions designed to elevate intensity of the stress response.
- 7) We meet the challenge successfully and have learned new skills we can apply in the future (e.g. how to manage time, useful study skills, etc.).
- 8) We have not learned new skills and instead now expect that we can’t be successful and have learned to fear the stress response.
- 9) Repeated adaptations lead to resilience.

MODULE 6

Activity #1 Handout 6.1 (Student)



Understanding the Stress Response (Graph)



- 1) Normal stress response (physical, cognitive, emotional).
- 2) What happens to the stress response if a person avoids the situation (point to A on line 1). Next time the stressor occurs the response is more severe.
- 3) What happens to the stress response if a person uses their experience of stress to arrive at a solution (point to B on line 1). Next time the stressor occurs the response is less severe.

MODULE 6

Activity #1 Handout 6.3

Steps to Dealing with “Stress” in a Healthy Way

- 1) When you experience the stress response, make sure you use the right words to describe it. Use the phrase “stress response”. Do not use: “anxiety”, “stress”, “Depression”, “stressed out”, etc.
- 2) Interpret the stress response as positive. For example: “My body and brain are getting ready to take on an important task”, or “I am getting a signal telling me to get ready”.
- 3) Figure out what is causing the stress response. For example: “Why am I feeling the stress response?” or “What is happening in my life that is leading to the stress response?”
- 4) Figure out how to share the problem(s) causing the stress response. Make a plan. One step at a time. Challenge your assumptions. Don’t use all or nothing reasoning. Ask someone for help.
- 5) Apply your solutions to the problem.
- 6) While you are doing all these things, manage your stress response with a stress reduction technique such as Box Breathing.

Challenging Our Thinking (10 minutes)

Purpose:

- To help students put into their own words how others have described the purpose of the stress-response.

How-to:

- 1) Have five flip chart papers posted around the room, each with a heading from the list of Challenging Our Thinking cards.
- 2) Distribute the Challenging Our Thinking cards (note: more than one student will be given the same card) and ask the students to read what is written on the card.
- 3) Have the students write out in their own words the meaning of the Challenging Our Thinking card that they have just read is.
- 4) Elicit student volunteers to share what they have written as the meaning of their Challenging Our Thinking card (suggest at least two different students sharing their response for each card).
- 5) Have students post their responses to each of the card titles on the appropriate flip chart. Leave these up for a week.

MODULE 6

Activity #2 Handout

“

Challenging Our Thinking Card #1

Ships are safe in the harbour but that is not where the fish are.

”

“

Challenging Our Thinking Card #2

A smooth sea never made for a skilled sailor.

”

“

Challenging Our Thinking Card #3

The roof of success has often been built on the foundation of failure.

”

“

Challenging Our Thinking Card #4

We cannot discover the other side of the ocean without the courage to
lose sight of the shore.

”

“

Challenging Our Thinking Card #5

Don't let your worries decide your future.

”

Modulating the Intensity of the Stress Response (10 minutes)

Purpose:

- To help students differentiate positive from negative activities that they can do to lessen the intensity of the stress response.
- To review the Box Breathing technique of stress response modulation.

How-to:

- 1) Hand out the Box Breathing cards to each student. Remind them that this is a technique that they have been doing at the start of each class in this course and encourage them to keep using this technique to help modulate their own stress response.
- 2) Have the Coping with Stress cards available in an easily accessible location in the room.
- 3) Have flip chart papers titled Positive Coping and Negative Coping hung on different sides of the class room. Have tape available for posting the cards on the flip charts.
- 4) Ask students to pick up two Coping with Stress cards each and to post them on the flip chart paper categories in which they best fit – Positive Coping or Negative Coping.
- 5) Keep the posted lists up in the classroom for one week following the end of this activity.

Box Breathing

One useful technique to help with dealing with stress is Box Breathing. It takes about 15 minutes to learn and once mastered can be applied unobtrusively and quietly – ideal for a classroom situation. This technique is described below. Before beginning the How Do You Cope exercise would be a good time to teach the students Box Breathing.

Box Breathing can help your heart rate return to normal, which helps you to relax. Here's how you do it: If possible, sit and close your eyes. If not, just focus on your breathing.

Step 1: Inhale your breath (preferably through your nose) for 4 seconds.

Step 2: Hold your breath for 4 seconds. You're not trying to deprive yourself of air; you're just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs.

Step 3: Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds.

Step 4: Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing again.

Repeat this process as many times as you can. Even 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed and in control.

MODULE 6

Activity #3 Handout

Coping With Stress Cards

Withdraw – not mix with other people

Play computer games

Visit a favourite person

Eat more

Quit (the job, the team)

Avoid or put off something you have to do

Prioritize
(put the most important things first)

Fantasize (daydream an escape)

Plan (figure out how to do it)

Start a fight

Think positively about how it will turn out

Worry

See a counsellor

Eat junk food

Sleep more

Go for a run

Party/socialize

Run away

Get sick

Blame someone else

Coping With Stress Cards

Blame yourself

Ask for help

Talk it over

Eat less

Have a shower

Drink alcohol

Work harder

Meditate

Pretend it's okay

Watch television

Smoke cigarettes

Go out

Complain

Change direction

Go to bed early

Exercise

Stay out late

Listen to music

Call friends

Write about it

MODULE 6

Activity #3 Handout

Coping With Stress Cards

Walk the dog

Cook something

Pray

Take a day off

Take risks

Problem-solve

Cry

Set goals

Play sports

Sleep less

Go shopping

Draw or paint

Tidy up

Make something

Find new friends

Joke or laugh

Go for a swim

Taking Charge of My Health

Purpose:

- To reinforce that mental health and physical health are obtained and maintained with numerous similar strategies.
- To provide a diary experience of daily activities needed to obtain and maintain good mental health.

How-to:

- 1) Introduce the students to the resource Taking Charge of My Health (provide each student with a copy of the resource with enough pages for a week of diary keeping).
- 2) Instruct each student each day to choose one item from each of the diary sections as their “next day challenge” and to try and complete each of those challenges the next day.
- 3) Ask the students to do this daily for a week. Also, do it yourself to model how.
- 4) Review the exercise a week from now. Lead a classroom discussion. How many challenges did each student manage to keep daily (on average)? How did they find the exercise (tiring, difficult, enjoyable, etc.)? What did they learn from doing this exercise?