



PREVENTION network

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For **Professionals**

Fall 2008

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Stress – A Leading Cause of Youth Substance Use

According to a 2007 study by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, one of the leading causes of teen drug use is stress from school. In the Partnership study, 73 percent of teens reported that school stress is the primary reason for drug use. These motivating factors for teen drug use are dramatically different than past research has indicated. Over the past decade, studies have indicated a steady changing trend in what teens perceive as the motivations for using drugs. The “to have fun” rationales are declining, while motivations to use drugs to solve problems are increasing.

When creating substance abuse prevention programs it is important to address the factors contributing to substance use. Strategies for coping with stress should be included in a comprehensive prevention plan and it is important that teaching coping strategies for stress begin at an early age and continue through high school.

Some signs that a student may be experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress are:

- Unable to concentrate
- Drowsiness or fatigue
- Feeling depressed, edgy, guilty, tired
- Experiencing stomachaches, headaches, trouble sleeping
- Laughing or crying for no reason
- Blaming others for bad things that happen to them
- Only seeing the downside of a situation
- Losing interest in favorite activities/hobbies
- Resenting other people or responsibilities

Kids under stress often feel isolated and anxious, which can lead to experimentation with alcohol and other drugs. Therefore, it's imperative for these students to receive support from school and at home. Include stress management in curriculum and develop school wide strategies for identifying and supporting students who are experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress.

PREVENTION TIPS

Programs that teach good stress management skills should teach the following:

- An understanding of normal physiological responses to stress.
- An awareness of your emotions, thought patterns, and behavioral response patterns.
- Managing emotions: Recognizing, labeling, and expressing responsibly.
- Relaxation and self-soothing techniques (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing and progressive relaxation).
- A problem solving method.
- Assertive communication skills for dealing with interpersonal difficulties.
- The learning and use of help-seeking behaviors (not looking at something is one way of coping, but dealing with something and getting any needed help for it quickly is an even better way).
- Effective study techniques.
- Healthy sleep, eating, and exercise routines.
- How to break large tasks down into more manageable parts, and then set a schedule for tackling each of the chunks.

*Dr. Aaron White, School Psychologist,
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“It’s not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.”

Hans Selye

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ASK AN EXPERT

Stress is one of the leading causes of youth substance use. What can schools do to help reduce stress for students?

We all feel stress and anxiety; they are normal aspects of life. Stress is bad when it overwhelms our ability to cope. And there is no doubt that schools can contribute to children and adolescents feeling overwhelmed. By herding youths together into groups, their natural inclination to engage in social comparisons is accentuated. Students experience pressure to perform from teachers, parents, and from their own internal expectations. At school students must cope with the anxiety arising from being continually evaluated by teachers on achievement and classroom behaviors and by peers on dress, grooming and social behaviors. Social pressures are felt keenly by students as they negotiate interactions and relationships with peers, with intense amounts of stress being added in schools where bullying, sexual harassment, or racial/cultural tension exists.

Schools can and do play a critical role in teaching good coping skills. Indeed, because schools contribute so much to the stress load students face, it can be argued that schools have a responsibility to teach appropriate and effective methods of handling stress-provoking situations.

As in drug education in general, prevention is key. Dealing with anxiety

problems early is important because untreated anxiety can build to a clinical level or can even morph into more-difficult-to-treat depression. In order to keep youth from self-medicating (or skipping school, cutting, restricting eating, etc.) as a means of coping, we need to teach effective stress management skills in advance. Because children and youths encounter new stressors as they age, best practice would be to teach and reinforce stress management concepts and practices each year. Ideally, all school districts would utilize a well-developed K-12 spiral curriculum; that is, a set of stress management concepts and lessons that comes around each year, increasing in complexity and depth as children develop. A well developed curriculum like this would replace the hit and miss approach in which not all students or all grades receive stress management instruction.

As students progress through the grades, managing stress around marks, presentations, and tests becomes more salient. Perfectionism is a bugaboo for many secondary students and must be dealt with. Because unmanaged stress can and does hamper so many students' progress in school, students should be exposed to stress management techniques in each of their secondary years. In addition, school-

wide monitoring systems should be in place to identify students not coping well so that appropriate interventions can be directed their way quickly. If a good stress management curriculum has been taught in the district, a counsellor may need only remind the student of how the student dealt with similar stressors in the past. Like adults, students feeling overwhelmed tend to forget what has worked for them previously. Finally, one of the keys to helping secondary students is getting them to plan ahead to deal with upcoming stressful periods. Students need to be taught and reminded to make sure they are getting regular sleep and exercise and are studying in a quiet place before the mid-term exam period arrives. Similarly, they need to constantly nurture their important relationships with others so that their supports are in place when big stressors hit.

Finally, some schools are experimenting with mindfulness training. Mindful awareness allows one to calmly accept and acknowledge stress and difficult emotions without being caught up and swept away in them.

Dr. Aaron White
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ACTIVITY CORNER

Stress and Drug Abuse

Objective: Students will understand and reinforce their knowledge of how stress affects the body, how drugs impact the body's response to stress, and how stress and drug abuse are related.

Grade level: Grades 8 - 12

Estimated time: 60 minutes

Materials Needed: Two photocopies of "[What do You Know About Stress and Drug Abuse](#)" for each student for a pre- and post-lesson quiz; a copy of the article "[Stress and Drug Abuse](#)" for each student.

Instructions:

1. Introduce the topic of stress by asking students about stress they experience in their daily lives. Briefly discuss their responses. What are some ways (positive and negative) that teens respond to stress? Record student responses.
2. Distribute copies of the [Student Activity](#) Reproducible. Tell students to write their name on the paper and answer the questions.
3. Have students read the article "[Stress and Drug Abuse](#)". When they have finished, begin a discussion by asking, What are some ways that the body reacts to stress? What are some connections between drugs of abuse and stress? What has some of the latest scientific research revealed about stress and drugs?

For the remainder of the lesson including answers to the student activity, [click here](#).

RESOURCES

1. Barrett and May, 2007, **Friends For Life Program**
> [Click here](#) <
2. **Kids Health Website**
> [Click here](#) <
3. Simon Fraser University, **Wellness Module 2: Stress and Wellbeing**
> [Click here](#) <

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