

Stress: How teachers can help their students cope

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This post is part of a 4 part series on stress and learning. To see the rest of the series click [here](#).

In [Part I](#) we examined what was [neurologically](#) happening to the brain while under stress. We now understand that stress impedes learning and interferes with [memory retrieval](#). So what can we do about it? The following is a list of suggestions on how teachers can help their students cope with stress.

Reducing Stress in the Classroom

- **Students need to understand what stress is and how to cope with it**

Making them aware of how to recognize stress in themselves and in others will help them handle the situations much better.

- **Every student needs an adult that they can trust and rely on**

Developing a positive student/teacher relationship is critical for reducing stress. For [children at-risk](#) they need someone that has a calming and empathetic presence that they can go to when in need, such as a homeroom teacher, the school psychologist, the school nurse or resource teacher.

- **Teachers need to allow for social connectivity within the classroom**

[Matthew Lieberman](#), social psychologist and neuroscientist, in his book, [Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect](#), states that just like our

need for food and shelter, we have the need to form relationships and to connect to other human beings. That's why we want to develop loving relationships, fit into a school, cheer on a sports team and even check our Facebook pages. Developing a classroom culture of "All for one, and one for all," benefits the entire group as well as each of the individuals within that group.

Teachers need to keep this in mind when developing their lesson plans. Feeling socially connected, in a safe environment, helps build relationships. "Tend-and-befriend" (Bergland, 2013) is the exact opposite of "fight-or-flight." Having good social relationships increases [oxytocin](#) and actually reduces [cortisol](#). Face to face relationships are the best, however, "phone calls and even Facebook can reduce cortisol if they foster a feeling of genuine connectivity" (Bergland, 2013).

- **Teach [time management](#)**

When people are organized, they have less stress. Allow students to have flexible due dates on assignments. This will lower their anxiety about due dates as well as keep them motivated and on top of their work (Smith, 2013).

- **The importance of acknowledging student effort**

Recognize the student's effort by either by giving them a grade for their effort or providing extra points. This encourages students to take risks and persevere.

- **Teach [mindfulness](#)**

Developing moment-to-moment awareness of one's surrounding environment will help the student focus on the current activity as well as reduce anxiety and help improve their coping experiences in the future.

- **Allow for individual needs**

For especially high-anxiety situations for some students, reduce the tension. If a child doesn't like reading orally, only call on them when they know the passage and are well prepared. To help with test anxiety, have an adult (teacher or aide) help those students that prefer to have the questions read to them.

- **Include physical activity within the school day**

I am alarmed to see how many schools are cutting back (or completely eliminating) their recess time. Nothing could be worse for child development. When I was a child we had physical education class every day and now children are lucky to have it once or twice a week. Not only is the human body developing during childhood and therefore needs this type of activity, stress can be greatly decreased with physical movement. Even taking the class outside for a short walk will reduce anxiety.

- **Keep humor and laughter in the classroom**

A good laugh has many effects. Not only does it “lighten your load mentally,” (Mayo Clinic, 2016) but it also affects your body. It activates and then cools down your [stress response](#), thus giving you a relaxed feeling. Laughter releases [dopamine](#) which reduces stress and increases memory (Mayo Clinic, 2016). Students love to hear personal stories pertaining to things that happened to their teachers when they were students. This also strengthens the bond between them.

- **Lessons should strive to reach that deeper learning level**

[Authentic performance tasks](#) and [project-based learning](#) actually deepen the student's understanding on both the factual and conceptual levels. If the teacher's goal is simply test preparation, students may have a difficult time applying what they've learned to novel questions or problems. This is why [deeper learning](#) is one of the best test preparations a teacher can actually provide to help reduce anxiety.

“When students experience their learning as personally meaningful, their [intrinsic motivation](#) strengthens long term, durable memory networks. These are far more accessible for test retrieval (and long-term access) than rote memory” (Willis, 2017). Making the lessons and information meaningful to the students enables the brain to effectively store these memories thus making them easier to retrieve.

- **Create a “mental suitcase”**

Judy Willis, neurologist and classroom teacher, recommended that students could reduce stress and increase their memory by taking a sheet of paper and writing the most important items, formulas, procedures, vocabulary, etc. as a review. Doing this right before taking the test will “... increase their retrieval efficiency when they’re not trying to hold that important information in working memory throughout the test” (Willis, 2017).

- **Visualize a successful performance**

Just like Olympic performers, athletes mentally visualize the physical movements they’re about to perform. This activates critical motor brain networks. Not only does this activity reduce stress, it increases confidence and “preheats” the memory circuits they’ll want to access (Willis, 2017). Have the students visualize how great they’re going to do on the test... have them picture how they’re going to remember important facts and answers making the experience a very successful activity.

Conclusion:

Stress hijacks the brain when it comes to learning. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the stress their students are experiencing in the classroom as well as in their personal lives. Although we have little control of what happens outside the classroom, we can provide the support and help they may need to

handle these stressful times. By understanding how stress affects learning, teachers can help build their student's [emotional resilience](#) as well as activate their highest levels of [cognition](#).

For comments and/or questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at DrLou@meteoreducation.com

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About the Author:

Dr. Lou E. Whitaker has a Bachelor of Science in Education from Northern Illinois University, a Masters in Administration from National-Louis University and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University. Having over 35 years of experience in education, she has been a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, and served as the Associate Superintendent for Schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. She is currently an Educational Consultant for Open Minds Enterprises, EdCenter, Global Center for College & Career Readiness, as well as a consultant for MeTEOR Education.

Chosen as one of Dr. Pat Wolfe's Brainy Bunch Members, she has been involved with Dr. Wolfe's continuous study of the human brain. The Brainy Bunch is a group of educators and health professionals who are passionate about brain development and its impact on learning. On a yearly basis, the group invites two outstanding neuroscientists to meet with them and discuss their latest research developments. Then this renowned group of educators, led by Dr. Wolfe, translate neurological research into classroom practice. Dr. Whitaker understands the importance of keeping abreast of what is going on in neuroscience as well as understanding the importance of data-driven best practice research. These are essential for making a positive impact on our students' lives.

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