

Teaching Students How to Deal With Stress

Strategies to help upper elementary and middle school kids who have experienced trauma understand and control their emotions.

[Lori Desautels](#) December 3, 2018

Social and Emotional Learning



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When people feel stressed because of toxic levels of adversity—such as experiencing or witnessing physical or emotional abuse, or substance abuse—they find it very challenging to step back from a negative experience, pause,

and calm their nervous systems. When this happens during adolescence—as the influence of peers is increasing and young people cope with the challenges of a developing sense of self—the stress can be very challenging.

Fortunately, there are some emotion regulation strategies that educators can build into their instructional practices, routines, bell work, and so on that help students pause and reflect a bit on their choices and dilemmas. I've been implementing these brain-aligned strategies in the upper elementary and middle school grades in the Indianapolis Public Schools.

These activities are not to be implemented in the heat of the moment, when students are extremely agitated or dysregulated. These are preventative and reflective. A previous article highlights [more strategies](#) that can be used to create an atmosphere that feels safe for traumatized students.

Seeing That Peers Have Had Similar Experiences

We may think of adults as the go-to or point people for helping young students regulate negative emotions and experiences, but peers can be of great assistance to one another if we teach and model how to be present for one another.

There are many times in our middle school classrooms when students are surprised to learn that one of their friends has experienced adversity like their own. We can use these moments to build cooperation and collaboration within our schools and classrooms.

In a morning meeting or when small groups are meeting, have students discuss questions that will show them what they have in common. You can start with a silly question like, “How many of you have two eyes (or two thumbs, or hair)?” Students might laugh, but this will drive home that they have things in common.

You can then move on to more fraught questions: How many of you have ever

broken a bone? How many of you have ever been afraid? How many of you have ever not eaten breakfast? Dinner?

As the year goes on and students build trust with each other, the questions can become more intense: How many of you have ever had something scary happen to your parents or brothers or sisters? How many of you have been in the hospital with an injury or illness? How many of you have ever had someone you love arrested? How many of you have experienced the death of someone you care about?

Many of us have experienced some of these situations. If we keep them to ourselves, they may grow to feel overwhelming, taking up so much space in our minds that the only things we think about are the negative experiences and problems we have. If we see that others have experienced these things also, that can help us come to terms with them.

A Framework for Teacher Intervention

When a student begins to become agitated, irritated, or upset, teachers can try to co-regulate with them if they have not reached that point of no return where the anger or sadness overrides their ability to talk or share concerns or challenges. When adolescents bring significant adversity to their schools and classrooms, they often need a trusted adult to listen, to gently probe, and to share possible solutions and improved outcomes.

The following questions are meant to spark a discussion and show empathy while helping the student calm their nervous system—they can begin to repair and heal with an adult who sees them, feels their pain, and listens to learn.

- Is there anything you need right now that would ease your mind and feelings?
- Is there another way you'd like to address this other than with words? I have some paper, pens, and crayons, or you can work with some clay.
- If you could list three or four people you need right now, who would they

be? How would they help you?

- Is there a place here at school that feels safe to you where you can rest until you feel a little better?
- Are there any objects or belongings here that would comfort you?
- When you're ready, I want you to know I'm right here, ready to listen.

A Garden of Well-Being

For this strategy based on a metaphor and focused on the development of students' minds and emotions, I start by bringing a bouquet of flowers and several types of fruit and vegetables to a morning meeting. As a class, we discuss how they're similar and different, and what it takes for them to grow and flourish. Then we make connections between the students' mental and emotional development and the flourishing of a garden.

We discuss questions like: What makes each of these fruits, vegetables, or flowers unique? What ingredients and environments do these plants need to grow? Are any of these ingredients the same for your own mental and emotional development? What would be your sunlight? What would be similar to water for your mental and emotional health?

If you think of your mind or emotions as a garden, do you have a protective fence? Do you have boundaries, routines, and structures that keep you safe and comfortable?

This strategy can be useful in helping students to analyze their own feelings and to realize which people, places, and experiences in their lives act as nutrients for their well-being.