

# Supporting Well-Being



Understanding the Stress Response  
and Strategies for Resilience

learning | **as unique** | as every student



**Calgary Board  
of Education**

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<b>Tuning into our Students and Providing Support .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Protective Factors .....	3
Teaching social-emotional learning and resiliency through a strength-based approach.....	3
Classroom Conversation Guide .....	3
<b>Key Understandings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Stress Response .....	6
Universal Supports.....	7
Targeted and Specialized Supports.....	7
Targeted supports .....	7
Specialized supports.....	8
<b>Teacher Resources .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Brightspace/D2L Wellness Sites.....	8
COVID Tip Sheets.....	9
Resources .....	9
Other Agency Resources for Students and Parents: .....	10

## Tuning In and Providing Support



*“Resilience can help us get through and overcome hardship. But resilience is not something we are born with—it’s built over time as the experiences we have interact with our unique, individual genetic makeup. That is why we all respond to stress and adversity—like that from the COVID-19 pandemic—differently. Think of resilience as a seesaw or balance scale, where negative experiences tip the scale toward bad outcomes, and positive experiences tip it toward good outcomes.”*  
(Centre of the Developing Child, Harvard University)

### Protective Factors

Protective factors are strengths and supports that allow children to succeed despite many risk factors. Three key factors offered by schools that protect youth and promote their resilience are 1) caring relationships, 2) high expectations and academic standards, and 3) opportunities for participation and contribution.

The school plays a vital role in providing protective factors to support students. Through daily contact, schools help shape students’ beliefs in their own strengths and abilities to achieve, promote their resilience when exposed to adverse events, and even may prevent problems from occurring in the future.

### Teaching social-emotional learning and resiliency through a strength-based approach

Teaching social-emotional learning and resiliency is essential for students to develop general health literacy. The development of social-emotional and mental health literacy equips students with both conceptual understanding and practical strategies. This empowers students to evaluate their personal well-being and consider how their choices affect their ability to regulate, communicate and connect with others to help successfully navigate different situations.

### Classroom Conversation Guide

This conversation guide is designed to support students in learning the conceptual and procedural knowledge in the PowerPoint Presentation for High School entitled *Supporting Student Well-Being for Learning: The Stress Response and Strategies for Resilience*. Included in the PowerPoint are two Teen Mental Health videos. The guiding discussion questions are meant to be used or adapted at the teacher’s discretion.

Video 1: [Understanding Stress](#)

- Teen Mental Health offers a [Healthy Stress Management Guide](#) which includes supplemental materials and a chart with helpful strategies and corresponding evidence to facilitate further discussion.

#### Video 2: [Mental Health Literacy Explained](#)

- Teen Mental Health offers a [Language Matters Guide](#) which includes additional descriptors to illustrate experiences of mental health across the pyramid and facilitate further discussion.

\*These video links can also be found under teacher resources at the end of this document.

## Key Understandings

Creating a sense of safety in the classroom is critical as students return to in-person or hub learning. A sense of belonging will develop as students and teachers engage in learning opportunities about what causes anxious feelings, how our bodies respond to stress, and strategies for resilience. Supporting students to gain the following key understandings and skills will help them develop a more positive sense of self as they confidently learn to regulate emotions during stressful situations.

- We often confuse stress with anxiety, and this confusion has led many of us to become afraid of one of the most important and natural states of our physical and mental health, which is our stress response
- Certain types of stress may not be good for us, but most types of stress can be helpful. Daily stressors can help us build skills and resilience.
- Physical symptoms of stress may include a racing heart, rapid breathing, body tension or not sleeping. The stress response is normal, and it is actually our body's best effort to get us ready to face the challenges that come our way.
- When we experience the stress response, we may be faced with two different experiences. In Path A, one may feel that they are stressed out, overwhelmed, or they cannot handle the situation. In Path B, one may feel that they can manage the challenge and find a way to get through it. If we avoid situations or things that cause the stress response, it may make us feel better in the short term. But, when we encounter the challenge again in the future, it actually makes the stress response even worse.
- Path B may not come naturally, but facing stressors takes courage, and the more you practice the easier it will become.
- The physical sensations of the stress response and anxiety are similar, yet the outcome is very different. The hallmarks of an anxiety disorder are persistent avoidance and withdrawal and causes major impairment in your life.
- "The stress response" is normal. It is usually a motivator, not anxiety or depression. On the mental health literacy pyramid, the stress response kicks in when we experience mental distress.

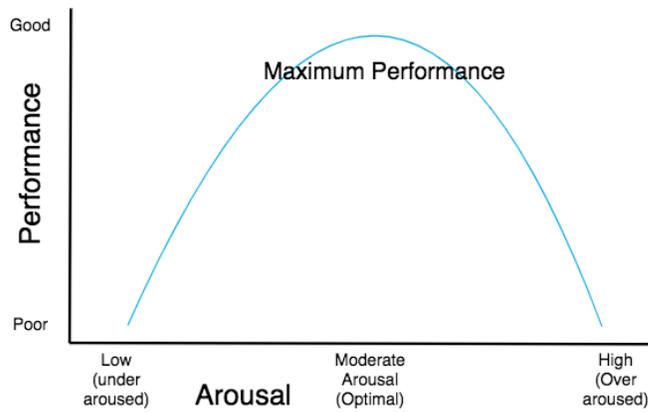
- Choose a helpful stress management technique such as box breathing, mindfulness, or physical exercise. Keep in mind that calming strategies may provide temporary relief until you are able to face the stressor.
- It is important to reach out to someone you trust if you need support. This might be a parent, a foster parent, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, a teacher, a principal, or a coach.
- If we understand our stress response, it will be easier to manage. We can take more control over the energy and focus it provides us.
- Language matters. An important part of decreasing stigma and getting help to those who need it is understanding and using appropriate language to discuss mental health and mental illness. This is mental health literacy.
- We all have mental health. The mental health literacy pyramid shows four separate and related components that help us understand and act on our mental health:
  1. No distress, problem or disorder: generally, everything is going well and we are enjoying our daily lives, relationships, activities, etc.
  2. Mental distress: common, normal and expected response to the stresses of everyday life.
  3. Mental health problem: reactions we have to larger life events or challenges requiring our resilience skills and resources to adapt.
  4. Mental disorder / illness: clinically diagnosed illnesses requiring evidence-based treatments from trained professionals.
- The pyramid is not a continuum – one experience of mental health does not lead to another, and we can even experience each level of the pyramid simultaneously.
- Individuals living with a mental illness also have mental health.
- When we use the terms incorrectly, we risk making light of major concerns. For example, anxiety disorder is not the same as feeling stressed before an exam, and depression is not the same as having a bad day.

## Possible Discussion Questions

- What is stress?
- What are some of the physical symptoms of stress?
- What is a Stress Response? How can it be a motivator?
- How is an anxiety disorder different from experiencing stress?
- Explain the mental health literacy pyramid.
- What strategies have you found helpful to deal with stress?
- What does it mean to have positive mental health?
- What words come to mind when you think of resilience?

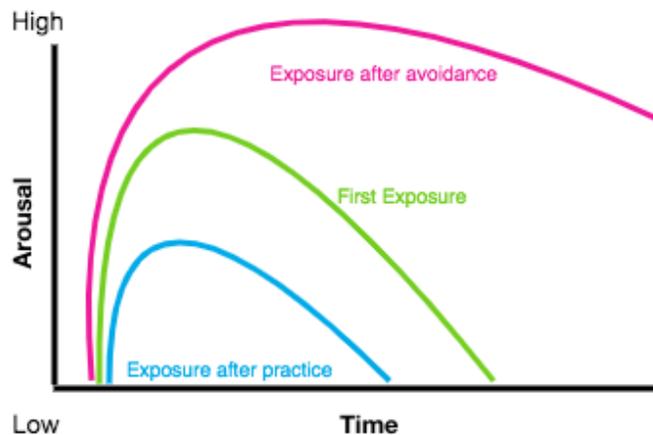
## Stress Response

### Inverted U-Shaped Relationship Between Arousal and Performance



Students are naturally driven to perform actions in order to maintain an optimum level of arousal. Too little or too much physiological arousal will decrease social and academic performance. If there is too much arousal the individual will need to use down regulation strategies such as calm breathing, grounding scripts or body scans. If the individual's arousal level is too low they will need to use up regulation strategies such as a movement break, tap out a rhythm, or use of something humor.

### Exposure Curve



With practice, students will build healthy skills to use in challenging situations. Providing consistent expectations, student voice and choice, transparency, and multiple entry points into social and academic activities enables students to practice and build personal strategies to help work through different situations in and outside the school community. The more exposure the more the student can habituate a healthier reaction to stress, enabling the student to adapt and take on more challenges throughout their lives.

## Universal Supports

Students thrive when universal conditions for success are created within the classroom. Some universal strategies to promote positive mental health include:

- Use of daily check ins
- Ensuring students know expectations for transitioning from class to class
- Relationship building activities
- Personal 1-on-1 time to connect - getting to re-know the “student story”
- Personalized learning
- Humor, celebrating strengths, class events
- Firm but fair boundaries - clear, consistent expectations
- Predictable routines
- Increased physical literacy and movement opportunities
- High quality meaningful learning experiences
- Use of common language

## Targeted and Specialized Supports

### Targeted supports

Strategies and interventions designed for the approximately 5 to 15 per cent of the student population who require additional supports or interventions to be successful. Students identified as being at risk for, or experiencing, mental health problems that affect their functioning at some level (home, school and/ or community) may need targeted, short-term interventions focusing on skill-building in areas such as:

- managing emotions
- focusing attention
- resolving conflict or problem-solving

There may be a need for referral to mental health supports or services that may be internal or external to the school. Targeted strategies are proactive in addressing mental health problems that are typically reactions to life circumstances or events, and that are impacting a student’s ability to function.

## Specialized supports

Are supports and interventions for those 2 to 7 per cent of students who require more intensive and individualized supports that focus on their particular mental health needs. This level of support often includes access to specialized service providers, partners or training. The complexity and intensity of significant mental health needs can challenge school staff's capacity and may sometimes require intervention services in a clinical setting.

## COVID Tip Sheets

- [Teen Mental Health Tipsheet 2](#)
- [Teen Mental Health Tipsheet 3](#)
- [Teen Mental Health Tipsheet 7](#)
- [How to Help Families and Staff Build Resilience](#)

## Resources

### Teen Mental Health

- [Covid-19](#)
- [Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide](#)
- [Understanding the Stress Response](#)
- [The Teen Brain](#)
- [Mental Health and Mental Illness](#)

### Anxiety Canada

- [Anxiety 101](#)
- [Facing Fears](#)
- [Thinking Right](#)
- [How to Chill](#)

### Social-Emotional Learning

- [CASEL](#)
- [Greater Good](#)
- [Heart Mind Online](#)
- [Smiling Mind](#)
- [Calm](#)
- [Gratitude Lab](#)
- [Meditation 101: A Beginner's Guide](#)
- [Character Lab](#)

### Video Links for Document

- Video #1 Understanding Stress  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=jHjkEfwfECo&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=jHjkEfwfECo&feature=emb_logo)
- Healthy Stress Management Guide  
<http://teenmentalhealth.org/understanding-stress/>
- Video #2 Mental Health Literacy Explained  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqYmIsYmUIU&feature=emb\\_rel\\_pause](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqYmIsYmUIU&feature=emb_rel_pause)
- Language Matters Guide  
<http://teenmentalhealth.org/schoolmhl/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/final-using-the-right-words.pdf>

## Other Agency Resources for Students and Parents:

Canadian Mental Health Association

Website | <https://cmha.ca/>

Telephone | 403-297-1700

Distress Center

Website | <http://www.distresscentre.com/>

Telephone | 403-266-4357

Connecteen

Website | <http://calgaryconnecteen.com>

Telephone | 403-264-8336 (24/7)

Text | 587-333-2742 (evenings & weekends)

Email | [connecteen@distresscentre.com](mailto:connecteen@distresscentre.com)

Centre for Suicide Prevention

Website | <https://www.suicideinfo.ca>

Telephone | 403-245-3900

Access Mental Health

Website | <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/services/Page11443.aspx>

Telephone | 403-943-1500

Calgary Grief Centre

Website | <https://www.hospicecalgary.ca/>

Telephone | 403-263-4525

Kids Help Phone

Website | <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

Telephone | 1-800-668-6868

Text 4 Hope

Website | <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17019.aspx>

Text | COVID19HOPE to 393939

Students can contact any of the community resources on this list and to seek help. We want students to know that there is always support available to them and that they are not alone.