

# Identifying and Responding to Personal Stressors: Utilizing Photo Elicitation in Health Education Courses

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## Abstract

The “Photo Elicitation Project” teaching idea applies the techniques of photo elicitation to stress prevention and management. This activity is designed to help students identify their personal stressors and to determine which stress prevention strategies are most useful for them. Objectives: students will be able to (a) identify current stressors in their lives, (b) analyze the determinants of these stressors, and (c) determine which stress reduction techniques work best for them. Target audience: college students, but can be adapted for other populations.

## Introduction

The relationship between the student and the environment in regards to stress perception and reaction is magnified in college students. Due to the transitional nature of college life, many students become overwhelmed and ‘stressed out’. Many students must adjust to being away from home for the first-time, maintaining a high level of academic achievement, and adjusting to a new social and cultural environment (Nelson et al., 2005). In order to cope with these transitions, it is imperative that students learn stress management and prevention techniques.

To address students’ increased stress levels, college-level health education courses need to acknowledge stress management and prevention as a component of healthy lifestyles. In order to help students adequately identify and respond to their stressors, creative and innovative approaches need to be utilized. The teaching idea explored in this article takes on a relatively new tool in health education called photo elicitation. This teaching tool encourages students to use photographs to address fundamental questions or issues. The specific teaching idea described in this article focuses on helping students to address and identify personal stressors through the art of taking pictures.

The use of photo elicitation in health education empowers students to take an active role in identifying their stressors and then to reflect upon the pictures that they take. The endeavor of taking photographs is a physical, as well as a cognitively active process that involves constructing rather than telling a static or exclusively verbal story. The photo elicitation process is often valued for its ability to uncover rich descriptive information

(Catalani & Minker, 2010). This idea of photograph taking is used to get a deeper exploration of personal stressors in each student’s life. Asking students to interpret images of themselves and/or others elicits processes of ‘making sense’ of meanings and the world around them (Harrison, 2002). Using these visual methods can also act as prompts to encourage students to reflect on their physical environments (Morrow, 2001). These photographs do not stand alone as the assignment, but are a component of each student’s stress reflection.

The idea of using photo elicitation in a college-level health education course stemmed from the desire to provide students with a creative assignment to help them identify their stressors and to also help them determine adequate stress reduction and coping techniques. Recently, visual research has become a common technique because of its user-friendly and relatively inexpensive technology, such as a disposable camera (Epstein et al, 2006). Overall there is strong agreement that photo elicitation can yield fascinating empirical data and provide unique insights into diverse phenomena, as well as empowering and emancipating students by making their experiences visible (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). This article explains how to utilize photo elicitation in college-level health education courses and to demonstrate how this activity helps students better identify and respond to their stressors.

## Methods

### Target audience

This teaching activity was designed for college students in an introductory level stress management and prevention course. It may, however, be adapted for other populations such as high school students and older adults. This activity may also be adapted to use in community health and other health education courses.

### Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to (a) identify current stressors in their lives, (b) analyze the determinants of these stressors, and (c) determine which stress reduction techniques work best for them. Students will also evaluate the activity and indicate if it was effective in helping them to identify stressors and stress reduction techniques.

### Materials and resources

- Camera, phone, or another electronic device that is capable of taking photographs
- Paper and writing utensils

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## Procedure

### Lesson

Although stressors are perceived differently among people, for this article a stressor is defined as any event or situation that an individual perceives as a threat that causes him or her to either adapt or initiate a stress response. Prior to the Photo Elicitation Project, students will learn which sources of stress are motivating and beneficial and which sources of stress are more detrimental and result in negative outcomes. This knowledge will help the students to better identify the current stressors in their lives.

After discussing the definition of a stressor and learning several stress prevention techniques students will embark on their Photo Elicitation Project. This teaching idea is designed to help students identify their personal stressors and to determine which stress prevention strategies are most useful to them.

### Photo elicitation project

For this assignment, students will be utilizing the stress reduction techniques that they learned in previous lectures and relating them to the current stressors in their lives. This assignment is broken into three parts; (a) identifying personal stressors, (b) applying stress reduction techniques, (c) evaluation of the assignment. Students are provided with written and verbal instructions about this assignment throughout the semester. Students are informed that they are to take pictures that are appropriate for an academic setting and that pictures of illegal substances are not allowed. Students are also advised to not take pictures of specific people but to take pictures of objects that would represent that person. An example of this would be taking a picture of a cluttered dorm room and explaining how your roommate's lack of cleaning is stressful instead of taking a picture of your roommate. This is included to protect the privacy of other students and individuals.

**Part A.** For Part A of this assignment, students will be choosing the three main stressors in their lives. They will then take a picture of each stressor and describe the role that it plays in their life and daily functions. The purpose of taking a picture of the stressor is to help the student determine the source of their stress. Instead of a student indicating that they are stressed by school, they would identify the specific component of school that creates stress for them such as a chemistry class or the transportation system. Students are advised to take pictures of their three main stressors; however they are informed that if these stressors are not concrete or easily photographable that they can be creative and take photographs of things related to these stressors. An example of this would be taking a picture of a chemistry book and then describing how this class is very stressful to them. In the reflection component, the student would indicate and describe what part of the class is stressful to them, such as exams, homework, group work, etc. This process of explaining why and describing how this class is stressful helps the student to further analyze this stressor. While the photography component of this project makes this assignment fun and creative, the reflection component gives the students the opportunity to write down the root causes of their stress and analyze the determinants of the stressors.

**Part B.** During the semester, students learned about the benefits of several stress reduction techniques such as, positive

self-talk, cognitive restructuring, planning ahead, exercise, yoga, meditation, and deep breathing (Oplin & Hesson, 2007). The students were advised throughout the semester to try and practice these various stress reduction techniques to find out which techniques or tools work best for them in different situations. For Part B of this assignment, students will choose a stress reduction technique or tool that they learned in class that can be used to address their stressors. Each identified stressor in Part A will require a different stress reduction technique in Part B. After pictures are taken of each of these stress reduction techniques, the student will explain how this technique helps to reduce their levels of stress associated with each specific stressor. For example, if a student indicated in Part A that the exams in his chemistry class are one of his main stressors, then in Part B he might take a picture of a planner and explain how planning ahead helps him to feel less stressed about his chemistry exams. The purpose of Part B of this assignment is to help students to find helpful stress reduction techniques and plan how they will utilize these techniques to better address their stressors.

**Part C.** After Part A and Part B are completed, the student will then reflect on this assignment and write their overall thoughts in Part C. Part C is used as the evaluation component of this project. The instructor can use this component to assess the achievement of the student learning objectives and to evaluate the effectiveness of this project.

### Submission and feedback

Students are provided with a template/grading rubric (Table 1) to use for this assignment at the beginning of the semester. After completing this assignment, students turn this project into their instructor/professor. The instructor provides feedback to each student about his or her project. This feedback includes a grade for the completion of the assignment and also suggestions or recommendations. These recommendations may be in the form of positive feedback or suggestions of other stress prevention techniques that they student might utilize. Due to the personal nature of this assignment, it is not shared with other students unless a student feels comfortable and volunteers to share his or her project with the class.

### Conclusions

This teaching idea provides a simple way for students to use photo elicitation to identify their everyday stressors. While this assignment used photographs, there is no reason assignments cannot be done with paintings, cartoons, or virtually any visual image (Harper, 2002). This activity helps students to identify negative stressors in their lives and to also describe appropriate stress-prevention techniques. This activity provides students an opportunity to recognize and effectively address their stressors in a positive manner.

### References

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Table 1.

*Template/ Grading Rubric Given to Students*

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A. Part 1- Identify your stressors

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1. Stressor 1
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
  2. Stressor 2
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
  3. Stressor 3
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
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B. Part1- Stress Relieving techniques

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1. Stress relieving technique 1
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
  2. Stress relieving technique 2
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
  3. Stress relieving technique 3
    - i. Picture (4 points)
    - ii. Description (4 points)
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C. Overall thought of this project (2 points)

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ESG's mission is to elevate the standards, ideals, competence and ethics of professionally trained men and women in the health education discipline. SOPHE promotes healthy behaviors, healthy communities and healthy environments. It has a membership of nearly 4,000 health education professionals and students throughout the United States and more than 25 international countries.

This partnership will support and promote ESG's mission, and give our membership a more cohesive opportunity to work with a premier professional health education organization. ESG will still have a professional presence at the American School Health Association conference, but on a smaller scale due to both membership needs and ASHA conference format changes.

Please look for more information about our annual meetings and awards presentations at the SOPHE conference in Portland, Oregon in 2015. For more information about this collaboration, please contact the National Office at [executivedirector@etasigmagamma.org](mailto:executivedirector@etasigmagamma.org) or 765-285-2258.