

The Wheels of Stress Go ‘Round and ‘Round

Rebecca A. Brey and Susan E. Clark

Methods

Abstract

“The Wheels of Stress Go Round and Round” teaching idea uses three activity wheels to reinforce stress-related content and concepts. After presenting a definition of stress, the instructor assists students in identifying stressors, and aids in formulating a list of negative, reactive behaviors and a list of positive coping mechanisms. Using information generated on the stress wheels, students will create stress scenarios and describe both frequently used negative reactions and positive learned coping strategies. Evaluation includes completion of written stress scenarios to determine if both positive coping mechanisms and typical negative behavior reactions are indicated in the students’ work.

Introduction

Although stress is perceived differently by many people, for the purpose of this article stress is defined as the inability to handle or cope with circumstances that affect one’s health and well-being in body, mind or spirit. Stress may be the result of situations, relationships, or perceptions (Blonna, 2007; Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2009; Seward, 2009). Stressors may be physical, mental, social, spiritual, emotional, occupational, and environmental.

After discussing the definition of stress, students will be asked to identify stressors, formulate a list of often-used negative reactions associated with stress, and determine behaviors that display positive coping strategies to use when students are stressed. This technique uses three “wheels” to reinforce stress-related content and concepts and concludes with students writing a personal stress scenario identifying negative stress reactions and explaining how positive coping strategies would be more effective.

This lesson addresses National Health Education Standard #7 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007), “Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.” The rationale for using the Standard #7 highlights the connection between the practice of healthy behaviors and positive quality of life. The lesson focuses on helping students identify positive coping strategies for stressful situations. From pre-kindergarten to grades 9-12, the performance indicators for Standard #7 address demonstrating behaviors that reduce or avoid health risks.

Objectives

After completing the lesson, the student will be able to:

- 1) Develop one personal stress scenario incorporating an actual or potential stressor.
- 2) Identify two or more negative (counterproductive) reactions.
- 3) Identify two or more positive (constructive) coping strategies.
- 4) Determine at least one pro or con of stated behaviors and strategies associated with the personal stress scenarios developed in class.

Materials and Resources

- Visual definition of stress (banner, poster, power point slide, dry erase board, etc. with written definition)
- Three large “stress wheels” with at least eight pie-shaped segments. The wheels are labeled: “Potential Stressors”, “Negative Stress Reactions”, and “Positive Coping Mechanisms”
- Dry erase markers/chalk and eraser if wheels are drawn on the board. Wheels drawn on the board may use a separate spinner or students may draw cards with numbers of the pie-shaped segments for selection purposes.
- If wheels are laminated and posted in front of the classroom, use dry erase markers and an eraser. Laminated wheels may have a spinner attached to the wheels or you may number the pie-shaped segments and use a separate spinner or select cards with numbers that correspond to the wheel segments.
- Paper and writing utensils

Target Audience

This teaching activity may be used for grades 6 through 12 and may also be adapted for adult learners, such as undergraduate college students. It could be used in its most basic form for children in the elementary school setting by asking questions such as, “What causes you to worry or be upset? This is often called stress. List some things that cause stress. When are you worried or upset, what do you do? Is this helpful? It may not be helpful because these are reactions. What are some things you might be able to do to help with the problem or situation in a good way? These are called coping mechanisms and are better for us to use to handle stress because they are thoughtful responses rather than just reactions.” This lesson may be adapted for adult learners with more “real life” examples such as work, boss/supervisor, partner/spouse, children, schedule, transportation problems, etc.

*Rebecca A. Brey, PhD; Associate Professor Department of Physiology and Health Science, Ball State University Muncie, IN 47306. Office phone: 765-285-3758; Fax: 765- 285-3210; E-mail: rbrey@bsu.edu; Life Member, Alpha Chapter

Susan E. Clark, MS; Student Teacher Supervisor, Department of Health Sciences, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-5220. Phone: 765-749-2130; E-mail: 01seclark@bsu.edu; Life Member, Alpha Chapter

* Corresponding Author

Procedure

Beginning the Lesson

Begin the lesson by defining stress as the inability to manage or cope with circumstances that affect one's health and well-being in body, mind and spirit and that may be the result of situations, relationships, or perceptions (Blonna, 2007; Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2009; Seaward, 2009; Romas & Sharma, 2007). Note that stress can be caused by people, situations, tasks, and expectations.

Next, describe the difference between negative reactions and constructive, positive coping strategies. Many times people react in a negative manner when they experience stress. Negative reactions are often immediate behaviors that are automatic and not thoughtful. These reactions may cause other problems or lead to prolonged stress or additional difficulties.

In contrast, positive coping strategies are those that we consciously use to minimize or manage stress. These strategies are normally learned responses and must be practiced in order to be used consistently during stressful situations. To develop the skills necessary for stress management, positive coping mechanisms can be fostered in the classroom through identification, appropriate matching of coping mechanisms to stressful events or situations, and practice.

Initiating/Brainstorming Activity

Ask the students to identify examples of what stresses them, causes or creates stress in their lives. Generate ideas through brainstorming. The instructor will write student generated ideas on the "Potential Stressors" wheel. Any and all student ideas should be accepted. However, duplicate thoughts should be condensed or paraphrased to combine similar concepts.

The class should be encouraged to identify several stressors and determine whether each stressor is physical, mental, social, spiritual, emotional, occupational, or environmental. Examples of physical stressors may include illness, fatigue, abuse or injury. Mental stressors may include school, tests, and projects and emotional stressors may include anxiety, fear, depression, love, and hate. Social stressors may involve relationships with family or friends, activities such as athletics, clubs, hobbies, faith-based institutions or politics while occupational stressors might include number of hours worked, tasks assigned, and level of supervision. Environmental stressors might be found in the area in which you live, the number of people in your home, or the weather. Finally, spiritual stress may include the absence of faith, searching for meaning in life, and lack of connections to the global community (Blonna, 2007; Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2009; Seaward, 2009; Romas & Sharma, 2007).

When students are asked to identify potential stressors they may talk about parents, siblings, grades, schoolwork, friends, out of school activities, etc. As students think about the ways in which they react negatively, they may include such things as yelling, chewing fingernails, isolating themselves, eating too much or too little, etc. Finally, as students discuss positive coping mechanisms to be learned and practiced, they might suggest exercising, journaling, adjusting your schedule, developing a support team, etc. Note that not all immediate

reactions stated may be negative. However, there is a tendency for initial responses to be less positive or helpful behaviors.

Next, ask the students to identify negative ways in which they or others may handle stress. If necessary, condense or adapt generated suggestions and write them on the "Negative Stress Reactions" wheel. Remember, negative stress reactions tend to be immediate, automatic, reactive behaviors, which may be highly emotional responses that do not involve self-reflection. Examples of negative reactions include: stomping your feet, hitting someone, sending an angry text message, or swearing (Blonna, 2007; Seaward, 2009).

Finally, ask students to state positive ways to handle stress. As before, condense or adapt student ideas and write them on the "Positive Coping Mechanisms" wheel. In contrast to negative stress reactions, positive coping mechanisms are practiced and learned actions that tend to be thoughtful, proactive, relationship-building, and self-nurturing. Some positive coping mechanisms include communicating with "I statements", exercise or physical activity, looking for the positive or bright side of the situation, hanging out with new or different groups of friends, and respecting and accepting all individuals (Blonna, 2007; Seaward, 2009). See Table 1 for a sample of negative reactions and positive coping strategies.

Processing the Activity

The instructor (or a student volunteer) spins the "Potential Stressors" wheel or selects a card to determine what type of stressor one may encounter. Next, spin the second wheel or select a second card for the "Negative Stress Reactions" wheel to identify immediate reactions a person may commonly display when under this type of stress. Finally, spin the third wheel or select a third card for the "Positive Coping Mechanisms" wheel which identifies a positive option which may address how to cope with this particular type of stressor.

The instructor should lead a discussion centered around the problems associated with the negative reaction identified on the wheel. Students will determine if the negative reaction is a typical behavior associated with this identified stressor and/or whether this reaction is realistic for this stressor. Also, students may identify different reactions that are more likely to happen when the identified stressor occurs. The purpose of this discussion is to show students that some reactions are more typical in some situations or are used more frequently by some people.

Next, a positive coping strategy is identified on the wheel and the students and teacher can determine whether this is an effective strategy to use with this stressor and the benefits of using this particular strategy. If the class deems the strategy ineffective, the students may specify other more effective or realistic coping strategies for this particular stressor. Emphasize that every positive coping mechanism may not be applicable for every stress situation. For example, the stressor was school homework. The negative stress reaction was anger and the positive coping mechanism was journaling. Students should be challenged to consider why homework was stressful (number of pages, deadline, etc.), whether anger was a helpful reaction (did anger lead to other consequences/problems, was anger an overreaction, etc.), and if journaling was the best coping mechanism at this time (is there time to journal now, will journaling detract from homework time, etc.). Discussion

Table 1

A Sample of Positive and Negative Coping Mechanisms

POSITIVE:

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| talk to friend(s) | deep breathing | walk |
| read | use “I” statements | jog/run |
| yoga | journal | seek counseling |
| prayer | stretch | use progressive relaxation |
| meditation | sleep/rest/relax | visualization |
| good nutrition | be aware of capabilities | be aware of limitations |
| listen to music | find new friends | look for the positive |
| set realistic goals | develop assertive skill(s) | have a support team |
| sing | have a hobby | let others know your feelings |
| see other’s point of view | cry | shrug off the situation |
| cook | good decision making skill(s) | sketch/draw |

NEGATIVE:

| | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| bite fingernails | eat more/less or not well | not attentive |
| bully others | use alcohol | cry a lot |
| talk a lot | lie | yell at people |
| use tobacco | fight | not sleeping/resting well |
| feel worried/anxious | steal | trouble talking |
| use illegal drugs | vandalize | cheat |
| withdraw | ignore the problem | constant sadness |
| become nervous/jittery | be shy or timid | upset most of time |
| feel hopeless | unable to focus | constant tiredness |

should also include potential alternative coping mechanisms such as deep breathing, “I” statements to the teacher, the accomplishment of small steps toward a final goal, etc. Complete multiple rounds of spinning the wheels to determine a variety of stressors, reactions, and coping mechanisms.

Closure

To complete this activity, ask students to write a personal stress scenario that identifies a stressor which they have faced in the past year. Each student should include any negative reactions or behaviors displayed by them or typically exhibited by someone experiencing this kind of stress. Next, students should describe two positive coping strategies that could effectively be used to minimize stress levels in this scenario. Students should indicate why the chosen strategies are likely to be beneficial. After the written assignment is completed, students may be asked to share their stress scenario and coping strategies with another student or in small groups. Together, students should determine the pros and cons of both the “negative” stress reactions and the “positive” coping strategies identified by each student. This discussion should reinforce and help students recognize that, in general, positive coping strategies have more positive, constructive end results and negative stress reactions are more likely to be ineffective, harmful or cause more problems.

For confidentiality purposes, students may submit their papers to the teacher rather than share directly with a classmate. Selected scenarios can then be read anonymously to the class for analysis and discussion. Discussing the unidentified scenarios may provide more options for the students to explore a variety of situations and help them to more clearly recognize the difference between reactive behaviors and thoughtful responses that more effectively address a challenging and stressful situation.

Evaluation

To assess achievement of the student learning objectives, the instructor should collect the completed stress scenarios and review them to determine if a stress scenario has been provided, and whether two or more negative stress reactions and two or more positive coping strategies that address the described stress scenario are outlined. Students also may indicate the pros and cons of both the negative and positive coping strategies in their paper. It is strongly suggested that “grading” be limited to basic completion of the components of the assignment. Identifying pros and cons of student generated stress management techniques can be assessed as part of a class discussion using a quick participation checklist or a “call out” to provide answers. In addition, because of the emotional intensity of some stress situations and the perceived or actual differences in students’

backgrounds or experiences, every student should be allowed to “pass” at any time during small or large group discussion. Revisiting ways to positively cope with stress should be revisited throughout the term.

Conclusions

This teaching idea provides a fun, easy, visual means to depict a variety of stressors. It helps students identify negative, reactive behaviors that too often lead to an escalation of stress. It also furnishes students with an opportunity to provide numerous distinctive techniques they can use when coping with day-to-day stress as well as crisis-type stress scenarios.

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