

## Supporting Young People's Mental Health – Simple Strategies

### Encourage pupils to tackle problems head on

A huge aspect of the Stress Control programme was to encourage pupils to tackle problems head on. Avoidance is a common strategy employed by us all when stressed and it may work in the short term but in reality it doesn't solve a problem in the long term. Encouraging pupils to tackle their issues head on can help to build confidence and self-esteem when they start to see success. The following two strategies give this process a bit of structure which may be helpful.

#### 1. Break stress up – 'Prepare – Face Up –Review'

### **How do you handle stress?**

We looked at how the more you try not to think about something; the more likely you are to think about it. So, instead, we should think about it but in a more positive way:

We should **prepare** to face the stress

We should keep thinking our way through the stress as we are **facing up** to it

We should **review** how it went so we can learn from how we coped (or didn't cope)

An example we used was 'Kirsty has to go to a family party on Saturday'

Kirsty's usual approach would be 'I'll just not think about it'. So, in the week before, this is what happens to her stressed voice:

So, instead, she *prepared* by saying:

- ☐ "What do I have to do here?"
- ☐ 'Can I come up with a plan?'
- ☐ 'This could be hard. How can I best cope?'

This kept her stress at a level she could cope with. She then *faced up*:

- ☐ 'Keep thinking – don't jump to conclusions'
- ☐ 'Expect the stress to be there – live with it'
- ☐ 'Take it one step at a time'

Finally, she *reviewed* how it went:

- ☐ 'How did I do?'
- ☐ 'Did the plan work?'
- ☐ 'Can it be better next time?' (even if Kirsty didn't succeed, she might say: 'It didn't work, what did I learn?')

## 2. Making your way out of stress

Often the usual response to stress is 'I'll just not think about it'. Although most of us would think this was the right thing to do, it isn't. You should do the exact opposite, i.e. think about it – **prepare**, then **face up** then **review**.

It is much the same with actions. A lot of people say, 'I'll do that (or go there) once I feel more confident'. This sounds right. But, again, it is wrong. We've got to turn this on its head – until you try to do it, your confidence will never get a chance to grow.

Everyone knows what to do if you fall off a horse – you get straight back on. Because if you leave it to the next day, your chances of success have dropped. Same with stress – the sooner you face your fears, the quicker your self- confidence and self-esteem will get a chance to grow.

The following is five-step face your fears practice that pupils could do or parents could use to discuss, stressful situations such as exams. You will see that it involves preparing, facing up and reviewing (from breaking stress up).

**1) What is the fear to face? Clearly state the problem.** – *e.g. exams*

**2) What do I think will happen when I face my fear?** – *More confidence entering the exam*

**3) Work out a plan: Preparing** – *See teacher to get all learning outcomes, study timetable, seek feedback, ask if there things you don't understand, practice past papers under timed conditions, mark and review. Give yourself an opportunity to switch the night before the exam, get a good night's sleep.*

**4) Face up –do it** – *Turn up and complete the exam*

**5) Reviewing** – *Think about what you did? Could you have done anything more to increase your chances of success? Make changes for next exam(s)*

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the idea of being aware of what's going on around you and being present. It encourages us to forget the 'what ifs' and 'if only' thoughts and focus more on what is happening in the here and now. Many people use mindfulness as a form of relaxation.

There are some great apps for mindfulness such as 'Calm' and 'Headspace'. These could be particularly useful for people who need to calm their mind before bed.

### Encourage pupils to rationalise thoughts

This is a simple technique we can encourage pupils to do which is to realise that thoughts are exactly that, just thoughts. An example, could be a thought such as '*I'm going to fail my maths exam*'. If pupils can begin to realise that our day is filled with thoughts, not all of them helpful then they can begin to rationalise the useful thoughts from the less-useful thoughts.

### Have a structure to days

This is particularly useful for when pupils are on exam leave, especially if there is no parent there to supervise! If days are planned and have a clear structure then pupils will gain more of a sense of achievement by sticking to that structure.

For pupils that struggle with stress and anxiety generally sometimes 'dead time' in a day can be the time when thoughts can be most damaging. If there is a clear structure of things to do then it can allow them to achieve more in the day and that can breed confidence and self-esteem.

### Set achievable goals

Following on from having a structure is to set achievable goals. These goals could be very personal and should be specific to what it is pupils find stressful. For example, if a pupil is stressed about their maths exam they could set themselves a goal of attending study support every week until exam leave, attending Easter School and completing a certain amount of **meaningful** revision each week. Again, achieving small goals like this can breed confidence and reduce anxiousness prior to exams.

### Take regular exercise

Exercise helps any form of stress but in particular depression. Exercise can be used as a way to get back on top.

Aim for 30 minutes five days a week. This can be broken up into 15 minutes, twice a day. Moderate is as good as hard exercise. 'Moderate' means your heart rate should be up but you are not so out of puff that you couldn't talk easily (or sing a song). 'Hard' exercise would be when you are out of puff. Fine to do this if you want but moderate works as well as hard.

Try to do a form of exercise that you enjoy as you will be more likely to keep it up. A brisk walk is as good as anything. Remember, you must get your heart rate up to get any benefit. Don't expect quick results

### Reduce Caffeine Intake

Try to cut down on caffeine if you feel it is a problem. Wean rather than cut out all of a sudden. Caffeine can be found in most fizzy drinks, energy drinks, e.g. Monster, and tablets (ProPlus), tea, coffee, chocolate, some medications, e.g. headache tablets. See [www.caffeineinformer.com](http://www.caffeineinformer.com) for more.

Switch to decaf tea and coffee, pure fruit juice; try to avoid energy drinks and tablets (ask yourself why you think you need them); try to avoid pain-killers if possible (but ask your doctor if these are prescribed).

### Relaxation – can take many forms

There are relaxation techniques which can be very successful such as belly breathing and progressive relaxation. Audio for this can be found at [www.stresscontrolaudio.com](http://www.stresscontrolaudio.com). Alternatively, pupils need to find whatever it is that relaxes their mind and use these when feeling stressed and/or before going to bed. A lot of pupils may think using phones/social media relaxes them but the reality is that it can have the opposite effect.

Relaxation is a very individual thing and parents could encourage pupils to think carefully about what really allows them to switch off and relax.

### Avoid alcohol and drugs

Alcohol and drugs can induce panic. Some people are more susceptible to this than others and we have made sure pupils are aware of the dangers of using these substances. This is something that could be backed up by parents.

### Get a good night's sleep

**Get the room fresh** - At some point in the day, open the windows to let fresh air in.

**Get the room at the right temperature** - The room should not be too hot or too cold. Around 64F or 18C is best. Too hot makes us more restless, gives us less REM sleep and tends to wake us up more. Too cold makes it harder to get over and maybe gives us more nightmares.

**Your bed** - If your bed is past its best, and if you can afford it, think about a new one. Make sure your pillows are right for you. Don't have a duvet that makes you too hot.

**Light** - We are made to sleep in the dark. So make sure you have thick curtains or blackout blinds. An eyemask works fine. Try to avoid bright screens, e.g. on your tablet, while reading in bed. Due to the light it gives off, switch your phone off or leave it in another room during the night.

**Noise** - If you can't stop the noise outside the house, use earplugs. You can also get an FM radio, tune it off the station so you get 'white noise'. This is good for swallowing up other noises.

**Exercise** - Exercise can be helpful but don't do this in the couple of hours before going to bed – early evening is perfect. A brisk 30 minute walk is fine or even two, 15 minute walks.

**Food** - Avoid big meals in the few hours before bedtime. Your digestive system wakes up and starts to work hard to deal with the food just when you want your body to be calming down. A slice of toast or a biscuit before bed should be fine. Avoid fatty or spicy food. Avoid cheese, nuts and bacon as these tend to wake us up. Bread and pasta, though, can be good for making us drowsy.

**Drink** - Try to cut down how much liquids you drink in the evening. This may stop you from waking up to go to the toilet.

**Caffeine** - This wakes up our bodies. So, cut back on tea, coffee, energy and fizzy drinks, some painkillers and headache tablets. Try to cut it out as much as you can from late afternoon onwards.

**Milky drinks** - The old wives were right! Ovaltine, Horlicks or hot milk might help you get over to sleep. Take these instead of tea or coffee at bedtime.

**Body temperature** - Just as I suggested that you need to go for the 'Goldilocks rule' for your bedroom, the same goes for you. So don't have a hot bath or shower straight before bed. And try not to be too cold before jumping into bed.

**Worry time** - Set a time in the evening to do your worrying – say 8pm. Do this well before your bedtime. So, if you start to worry in the morning, stop yourself and 'save' the worry until your Worry Time. Come 8pm, stop what you are doing and worry about all the things you have stored up over the day. Chances are you will have forgotten them. Or, even if you do try to worry, chances are you'll find it very hard to feel the worry.

**Arguments** - Try not to go to bed on an argument. So, work hard to make up before you try to sleep.

**Relaxation** - Use one of your relaxation tracks before going to, or when you are in, bed. Once you get good at it, you should be able to run the exercise through your head without having to listen to the track.

**Bedtime routine** - Do you have a bedtime routine? A transition between day and night? Give your body and mind a chance to build up a good routine. So go to bed at more or less the same time. Get up at the same time. Avoid long lies. Build up a routine at night that tells your body that you are getting ready for bed.

**Relax before bed** - Think of ways to slow yourself down in the hour before going to bed. Decide what you want to do – read? listen to music? chat? watch TV? And do it. If you have just come in from a night out or if you are studying, make sure you give yourself a space in which to switch off and relax.

**Tech detox** - See if you can avoid all technology in the hour before bed. Don't check texts, Facebook, Snapchat, etc while in bed. If you are charging your phone, make sure you can't see the blue light as this can disrupt your sleep.

#### Don't compare yourself to peers

A well-documented issue for teenagers is comparing themselves to peers or other people on social media etc. We have tried to encourage pupils to focus very much on themselves block out the other distractions and avoid comparing themselves to peers as human nature usually means we feel worse after this process. This could be reinforced from home.