



## Pupils with Mental Health Difficulties

### Stress



## Stress



### Classroom-based tips (focus on instructional methods)

#### 1. Make accommodations

When working with pupils with stress, consider making accommodations in the following areas:

**Homework** – Establish a time limit for homework and reasonable homework content as the stressed pupil can be overwhelmed by homework load and worry that homework is not of required standard. Consider asking the pupil about feelings and thoughts regarding the quantity and quality of homework. Sometimes reducing homework might create more stress, depending on the pupil.

**Testing** – consider exam settings; is the testing environment quiet and distraction free? The pupil may be better served sitting exams separately to other pupils. Is the pupil aware that testing will occur and prepared? Consider the use of multiple choice testing, word banks or cloze testing as the pupil may become overwhelmed and struggle to recall rote learning. Always be flexible, testing depends on the abilities of and difficulties experienced by the pupil.

**Assignments** – Consider breaking assignments down into individual steps and introducing intermediate deadlines with continuous progress reviews. Always be flexible according to the abilities and difficulties experienced by the pupil.

**Presentations** – Consider allowing the pupil to present only to the teacher and not to a large class group or perhaps use audio recording techniques. Gradually help the pupil to present to a bigger audience when you think s/he is ready.

[Reference: <http://www.heysigmund.com/anxious-kids-at-school-how-to-help-them-soar/http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/40>]

#### 2. Classroom Environment

**Monitor the Physical Surroundings** - Avoid clutter, including too much visual stimulation in the form of bright colours and other visual distractions. Do have some decoration, and displaying pupil work is a must, but avoid having your classroom space look too “busy”.

**Allow for Movement and Fidgeting** - Sitting still simply is not an option for some pupils; for many others it is doable, but at a high cost in terms of attention and focus. Some teachers have had great success experimenting with exercise balls instead of seats, disc cushions or simple “fidget toys”.

**Reduce Extraneous Noise** Some noise is good, when it is productive, and rhythm exercises are great for development. But some pupils shut down in the presence of “disorganised” noise. Reduce the number of hard reverberating surfaces where possible, and keep the music area to one corner of the classroom, with a simple divider where possible, so that those not participating can focus on other tasks.

**Ensure the stressed pupil is seated away from dominant classmates** so as to fully engage in the class. Consider seating the stressed pupil with a classmate s/he feels comfortable and confident

with. Consider talking to the whole class about stress and its consequences with the cooperation of your school counsellor/psychologist.

### 3. Build in Time for Transitions

Building in time for transitions is something most teachers are aware of, and do intuitively. Remember that sometimes when we try to hurry from one activity to the next pupils who have difficulty transitioning from a “lighter” activity to something requiring more focus, or vice versa, can get lost in the shuffle; therefore it is important to allow time and perhaps provide a little guidance during transitions.

### 4. Make Your Pupils Aware of Their Own Mind-set

Young pupils will always need some guidance and help to self-regulate. Help your pupils to be aware of how they are feeling. Meanwhile as a teacher remain conscious of the effect you and your classroom environment are having on your pupils. In turn these steps will reduce classroom management issues, and improve learning.

[Reference: <http://www.teachthought.com/>]

### 5. Be Proactive

Keep in mind that a pupil suffering from stress may be very reluctant to ask questions or contribute in class for fear of unwanted attention; this does not mean that they do not have something to say and it is therefore very important that teachers:

- Do not wait for the pupil to ask for help
- Check how the pupil is doing
- Ask the pupil for her opinion
- Check the pupil understands as s/he may be unable to ask questions

### 6. Make Appropriate Referrals

Make appropriate referrals to the principal, parent, school counsellor, school psychologist, doctor, or mental health specialist according to school policy. Ensure written parental consent where necessary.

[References: <http://www.heysigmund.com/anxious-kids-at-school-how-to-help-them-soar/>  
<http://www.worrywisekids.org/node/40>]



## School-based practical tips (focus on instructional methods)

### Announcement / Sign at School

#### 1. Promotion

Actively promote Mental Health Awareness Campaigns, and programmes in conjunction with local and national campaigns across your whole school.

## 2. Change in Routine

Let the stressed pupil and their family know of any planned change to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

## Class Divisions / Arrangements

### Change in Routine

Let the stressed pupil and their family know of any planned change to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

## Community

### 1. Support Services

Ensure any pupil suffering from stress is offered the support of existing services in the school such as those of the school psychologist/counsellor. When applicable make the correct referral to a psychologist or outside support services/agencies. Ensure written parental consent where necessary.

### 2. Promotion

Actively promote Mental Health Awareness Campaigns, and programmes in conjunction with local and national campaigns across your whole school.

## Curricular Adaptations

### Exam Management / Accommodations

Develop modifications and accommodations to respond to the pupil's fluctuations in mood, ability to concentrate, or side effects of medication. Assign an individual to serve as a primary contact and coordinate any necessary interventions. A pupil suffering from stress may be better served sitting exams separately to other pupils. Check in with the pupil to ensure s/he is aware that testing will occur and is prepared.

## Homework

### Exam Management / Accommodations

Develop modifications and accommodations to respond to the pupil's fluctuations in mood, ability to concentrate, or side effects of medication. Assign an individual to serve as a primary contact and coordinate any necessary interventions. A pupil suffering from stress may be better served sitting exams separately to other pupils. Check in with the pupil to ensure s/he is aware that testing will occur and is prepared.

## Parents / Parents' Associations

### 1. Support Services

Ensure any pupil suffering from stress is offered the support of existing services in the school such as those of the school psychologist/counsellor. When applicable make the correct referral to a psychologist or outside support services/agencies. Ensure written parental consent where necessary.

## 2. Home/School Communication

Develop an effective home–school communication system to share information on the pupil's academic, social, and emotional behaviour, and any developments concerning medication or side effects.

## Safety

### **Mental health Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy Healthy Eating Policy,**

Develop and implement health policies, which can be of great benefit to an anxious pupil. Healthy eating has been shown to reduce levels of anxiety and stress. Having a clearly defined school Mental Health Policy will provide your school with clear guidelines when dealing with mental health issues. A stringent Anti-Bullying policy may reduce the possibility of a stressed pupil becoming the victim of bullying.

## Scheduling Events

### 1. Promotion

Actively promote Mental Health Awareness Campaigns, and programmes in conjunction with local and national campaigns across your whole school.

### 2. Change in Routine

Let the stressed pupil and their family know of any planned change to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

## School Celebrations / Events / Activities

### **Promotion**

Actively promote Mental Health Awareness Campaigns, and programmes in conjunction with local and national campaigns across your whole school.

## Pupil Support

### 1. Support Services

Ensure any pupil suffering from stress is offered the support of existing services in the school such as those of the school psychologist/counsellor. When applicable make the correct referral to a psychologist or outside support services/agencies. Ensure written parental consent where necessary.

### 2. Missed Time Management

Ensure a pupil suffering from stress is furnished with any subject material covered when absent due to illness. Ensure the pupil is given adequate time to catch up on any work missed so as to help in lessening the feelings of stress.

### 3. Time Out

Consider allowing the pupil the opportunity to take time out from a stressful class environment by getting a drink of water or having a short walk; a pre-agreed signal can be used. Consider the use of a 'safe person' such as the school counsellor or year head for the stressed child to engage

with if feelings of stress become overwhelming. Consider the use of relaxation exercises during time outs that may help the pupil destress.

## Timetabling

### Change in Routine

Let the stressed pupil and their family know of any planned change to routine, such as time tabling changes or staff changes.

## Supportive Literature

Health - “A complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of disease or infirmity.” - *World Health Organisation*

“Mental Health is a balance between all aspects of life – social, physical, spiritual and emotional. It impacts on how we manage our surroundings and make choices in our lives – clearly it is an integral part of our overall health. Mental Health is far more than the absence of mental illness and has to do with many aspects of our lives including: How we feel about ourselves, how we feel about others, how we are able to meet the demands of life.” - *Mental Health Ireland*

**Stress** is a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc. Stress causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety. Stress in pupils may be caused by:

- Exams
- Problems at school or at work
- Sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- Relationships
- New responsibilities
- Moving to a new place
- A traumatic event – such as the death of a loved one
- New or chronic illness or disability
- Peer pressure or being bullied
- Unrealistic expectations from themselves, family, friends or culture
- Taking on too many activities

### Signs of stress in pupils

Too much stress can impact negatively on young people’s health both emotionally and physically.

#### Emotional signs to look out for are:

- anger or irritability
- anxiety
- avoiding other people
- crying
- moodiness – feeling frustrated with things that normally are not a concern
- low self-esteem or lack of confidence
- depression or sadness

### Physical signs to look out for are:

- upset stomach, diarrhoea or indigestion
- headache
- backache
- inability to sleep
- eating too much or too little
- raised heart-rate
- smoking

[Reference: <http://ie.reachout.com/>]

## Websites and EU Reports

### Useful Websites

International Association of Youth Mental Health [www.iaymh.org](http://www.iaymh.org)

World Health Organisation [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

Institute of Child Education and psychology [www.icepe.eu](http://www.icepe.eu)

### Relevant Articles

*Changing attitudes: supporting teachers in effectively including students with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream education*, Geraldine Scanlona and Yvonne Barnes-Holmes, School of Education Studies, Dublin City University, Glasnevin, Dublin 11, Ireland; bDepartment of Psychology, The National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2013.769710>

*Comorbidity of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents*. Brady, Erika U.; Kendall, Philip C. Psychological Bulletin, Vol 111(2), Mar 1992, 244-255.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.2.244>