Healthy Choices, Healthy Relationships:
Understanding Character and Consequences

A curriculum for health classes

By: Charlene Kamper

Health classes are an important forum for teaching relationship skills to teens -- but the concepts can be difficult to communicate. The innovative HEALTHY CHOICES, HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS simplifies the task with effective instructional materials that easily integrates into existing programs. Fully aligned with national frameworks for health education, Healthy Choices introduces students to the foundations of strong, satisfying relationships. In 11 lessons, they examine how family and media shape expectations about love and life. They discuss appropriate dating behaviors, identify and prepare for potential problems, explore the nature of mature behavior, practice problem solving, and learn other relevant life skills.

A recurring theme is the importance to teens of making informed choices about their relationships, their goals, and how they live their lives. A variety of lively activities challenge them to thoughtfully observe, evaluate and personalize messages the lessons.

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Grades 8-12
11 one-hour lessons

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# Healthy Choices, Healthy Relationships

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The lesson will discuss how to reduce stress that is often associated with making decisions and solving problems. Learning to recognize and manage stress is important for maintaining personal health and positive relationships with others. The lesson will present resiliency and stress management skills.

WORKSHEET ASSIGNMENT

- Stress Indicators,
- Ways to Handle Stress
- Get in Balance.
- People in My Life worksheet (Lesson 3)

OBJECTIVES

1. Participants will learn that some stress in life is normal and expected.
2. Participants will identify physical, emotional, and cognitive stress reactions.
3. Participants will work through a personal stress reduction plan.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Eustress is healthy stress that motivates and energizes.
- Distress is anxiety that makes a person feel threatened and overwhelmed.
- The general adaptation syndrome has three phases: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.
- Some stress is normative, meaning it is expected for a person’s age and activities.
• Other stress is non-normative: these are unexpected things that happen that are not experienced by everyone.
• Typical causes of stress: frustrations, daily hassles, conflict, life changes, and catastrophic events.
• Defensive coping for stress: drug use, aggression, withdrawal, suicide, and defense mechanisms.
• Active coping for stress: change situation or thoughts about the situation, get a hobby, exercise.
• Four life areas to keep in balance: relationships, health, things to do, fun.

KEY CONCEPTS

• Positive skills must be modeled and practiced.
• Healthy relationships are mutually supportive and beneficial for the people in them.
• Kindness and consideration toward others requires practice.

LESSON PREPARATION

• Copies of the Stress Indicators, Ways to Handle Stress and Get In Balance worksheets and handouts are in the student workbook.
• People in My Life worksheet from Lesson 3 is also in the student workbook.

TEACHING THE LESSON

Begin the lesson by asking the participants if anyone has been feeling stressed lately. Ask them to tell how they know they are stressed.

Discussion questions:
1) Do they have other family members who are also stressed?
2) How is it affecting the relationships at home?

Tell them that stress is often associated with poor decision-making and problem-solving. If necessary, review the four types of conflict resolution presented in Lesson 9. Because teens are still developing physically and have so many social and emotional things to handle at once, stress among teens is very common.
Slides #2-5
Go over the sources of stress experienced by most people. Not everyone deals with all of them, but most people will have some in various combinations.

Slides #6-7
Show the participants the difference between expected and unexpected stressors in life. Normative stressors are common to most people at certain times of life. Non-normative stressors are usually unexpected and not related to the experiences of others.

Slide #8
Point out that a person’s overall health and wellbeing is directly linked to his or her ability to solve problems and reduce stress. Ask the participants to turn to the Stress Indicators worksheet in the student workbook and fill it out. They are not limited on how many choices they can make.

When the participants have completed the Stress Indicators worksheet, have them look carefully at the answers they selected. Tell them that this is the body’s way of letting them know that things are not OK.

Slides #9-11
Tell the participants that there are differences in stress events. Since the body is not designed to sustain long-term stress, handling stress in the shortest time possible is beneficial for health.

Acute stress is the most desired because it has the least effect. Episodic stress is what most of the participants are experiencing currently, but it will change to new stressors as they enter each stage of life. The chronic stress level is the one to avoid the most because it wears away the body’s ability to fight disease and stay healthy.

Another factor that influences how a person perceives and responds to stress is their personality type. The Type A person tends to interpret things as more stressful and reacts accordingly, generally getting angry and yelling at others. The Type B person tends to keep things inside, and that increases their stress level but others may not be aware of it right away. Eventually stress catches up to them, too.
Ask each participant to turn to the *Ways to Handle Stress* handout in the student workbook. Go over the suggestions and remind them that these things don’t come naturally. Being sensitive to the messages their body is sending takes practice.

Tell the participants they are going to be challenged to problem-solve in their own life. Ask them to refer back to the *Healthy/Unhealthy* behavior chart they completed in Lesson 3. Have them look at the category they filled in with things that needed to be changed. Tell them they are now going to use the skills they practiced in Lesson 9 for decision-making to problem-solve a real-life situation.

Ask them to select one of those things they wrote down and, using the decision-making model, begin to brainstorm ideas for improving their situation. Encourage them to be creative—but realistic—with their suggested solutions.

It might be helpful to again show them the decision-making model they used in Lesson 9. Tell them that improving relationships at home is an important part of establishing balance in life. Building healthy working relationships with others is a source of happiness and also reduces stress. Allow about 10–15 minutes to complete this activity.

Slide #12
Show the participants the healthy lifestyle areas and let them see that “Relationships” is one of the four areas of balance. Go over the others on the slide. Ask the participants to turn to the *Get in Balance* worksheet in their student workbooks and ask them to consider what things they would put in each block.

Encourage them to work at cultivating healthy behaviors in each area now and in the future.

**LESSON NOTES**

Decision-making and problem-solving go hand in hand. Not all decisions are necessarily stressful, of course. In fact, some are quite simple and relatively easy to make. But when a person is faced with a problem, the decision-making process becomes much more difficult. As the very term “problem solving” suggests, there is a *stressor* of some kind causing an issue that needs to be addressed. A stressor is anything that triggers the physical stress response within an individual, and stressors are different for different people.
While some people have a higher tolerance for stress than others, the basic physical reaction is similar for everyone. Experiencing stress causes a chain reaction of chemicals and body responses that help a person handle the immediate situation. When a person is experiencing stress, the hypothalamus stimulates the sympathetic nervous system to prepare the body for physical activity. Blood pressure and blood sugar levels increase and tremendous amounts of glucose and oxygen are sent to the organs that are most needed; the brain, muscles, and heart. This initial response to stress is known as the **alarm reaction**. This is the first stage of what Hans Selye called the **general adaptation syndrome**.

But stress over longer periods of time is not healthy because it upsets the body’s normal regulatory systems by changing the internal environment. During the second stage, called the **resistance reaction**, the body continues to provide the necessary energy to handle the stress situation even after the alarm reaction has gone away. Body functions will slow down and run less efficiently in order to provide needed energy in other places. Long term, this stage wears down the body’s ability to do strenuous tasks, relax, and fight disease. People most often experience fatigue, which causes them to lose focus, make mistakes and have accidents, and begin to feel generally out of control. The resistance reaction puts heavy demands on the organs and blood vessels of the body, and in some cases, the body may give up under the pressure.

The final stage of the stress reaction results in **exhaustion**, the point at which the body no longer has the extra resources to provide a healthy balance. In this phase the body begins to lose potassium ions, which affects how efficiently the vital organs function. Blood sugar levels go down and the cells of the body do not receive enough nutrients to stay working. If the vital organs weaken, the person is now vulnerable to a variety of negative physical and psychological issues.

Teens will be greatly helped in handling stressful situations if they have more understanding of where their stress is coming from and what to do about it. There are different kinds of stressors. **Eustress** is healthy stress. It motivates and energizes a person for the task at hand; a new project, a challenging hobby, or a big game. **Distress** makes a person feel threatened or overwhelmed. This type of stress makes people anxious, producing negative effects on eating, sleeping, and concentration.

The typical sources for stress are: **frustrations, daily hassles, conflict, life changes**, and **catastrophic events**. Everyone has a certain amount of stress in their life. **Normative** stressors are ones that most people go through and are expected based on their age and activities at a given time. **Non-normative** stressors are events that are not typical; for instance, the loss of a loved one, a major illness, or a flood.

There are also differences in the duration of the stress. **Acute** stress is when an unexpected event happens but is handled rather quickly and goes away. After the
initial alarm reaction the body is able to return to normal. This is the best type of stress because it is only for a short period of time and the effects of the experience don’t last long.

**Episodic** stress is typical for certain times of life. It will be there for awhile, but then things change and so do the stressors. Peer pressure, school and homework, exams, and parent expectations are normative stressors for adolescents. Without question, some teens are able to tolerate the pressure better than others during these years. But adolescence eventually ends and a person is then faced with a whole new set of challenges.

**Chronic** stress is on-going stress that must be dealt with over a longer period of time. For instance, pressing family or psychological issues, a major illness, or money worries are situations that do not go away and over time cause the body to wear down its defenses. If this type of stress is not managed properly, it results in the exhaustion phase.

Stress that affects teens can come from a variety of sources. School and peer pressure have been previously addressed. In addition, problems due to bullying, identity formation, sexual activities, physical or emotional abuse in relationships, or dating and breaking up further increase the amount of stress experienced by teens.

Many of these issues are a result of emotional distancing in current teen social networking. When teens engage in physically intimate relationships without expectations for a future together, there is a vagueness about the relationship. While many teens promote the concept of “friends with benefits,” the lack of emotional connectness can lead to feelings of alienation, depression and an increased risk of STI’s and pregnancy, all major contributors to teen stress.

There are also stressors that come from the family that can add to the emotional burden a teen is already feeling. Family disruption such as divorce, remarriage, sibling rivalry, and relocation can cause a significant increase in stress. Sensitive parents can be very helpful during these years. Being able to communicate in an open and honest way with teens can significantly help them cope with these stressful events. These types of events give parents the opportunity to help their teens learning coping techniques. Teens need help with higher level reasoning, attention and planning.

The article reminds parents about the immature teen brain and its inability to handle higher reasoning, attention, and planning. Dr. Thorne suggests “…weekly family meetings, especially when a family is going through a difficult time…. It’s best to talk with your children about what is going on and to explain the family’s strategies for dealing with it.”
Personality types can influence how people experience certain kinds of stress. Simply put, a Type A personality tends to interpret events, normative or not, in a more competitive or threatening way. Because of an overtly expressive nature, there may be fits of frustration and anger that spill out toward others. The Type B personality tends to be less visibly reactive, but there are limits to how much pressure a young person can internalize and still handle well.

People of all ages have different ways of dealing with stress. Defensive coping often involves negative behaviors that ultimately create more problems. Drug use, aggression, withdrawal, and suicide are sometimes the problem-solving choices many teens make. Still others may develop behaviors like denial, lying, procrastination, and repression that are ineffective defense mechanisms for dealing with life.

Active coping with stress involves making the decisions and life changes that improve a stressful situation. This may require making adjustments in one’s behaviors and expectations. People who are willing and able to be more flexible with solutions often manage to solve problems in a more efficient way. Even when situations cannot change, one can learn to think about them differently. People who have active coping skills usually know how to relax and enjoy activities or hobbies that keep them grounded and interested. They also get physical exercise, probably one of the very best ways to reduce stress, increase stamina, and improve sleep, all of which help reduce stress.

The stress-reducing skills teens learn now will hopefully help them for years to come. Maintaining health and wellbeing are important elements for living a quality life and experiencing quality relationships. People who have a positive blend of responsibilities and activities they enjoy experience the most happiness. Four critical areas of balance are:

- **Relationships** that include family and friends who provide a strong support system;
- **Health** that involves proper diet, exercise, and sleep;
- **Things to do** are responsibilities that provide structure and focused attention on something important like school, a job, or volunteer work;
- **Having fun** in the form of recreation or a hobby that is motivating and interesting.
LESSON 10 SLIDE 1

LESSON 10 SLIDE 2

LESSON 10 SLIDE 3

LESSON 10 SLIDE 4

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