

# **Children's Services**

## **Central Area**

### **Educational Psychology and Specialist Support**

## **Stress in Schools, Teachers and Pupils**

### **Information Paper for Schools**

**These Information Papers aim to:**

- **Provide a professional overview of topics of interest**
- **Give information to professionals and parents about the identification of children and young people with particular problems or needs**
- **Offer suggestions on ways of meeting those needs**
- **Suggest sources of further information**

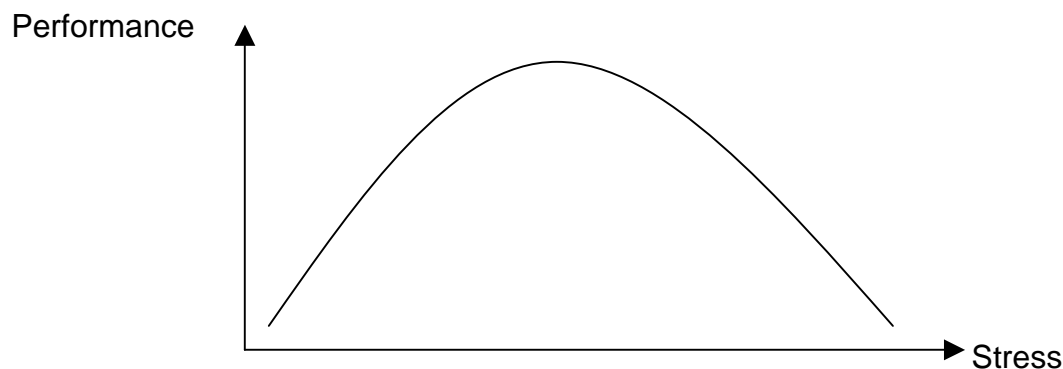
**We are pleased to receive feedback about Information Papers and suggestions for future topics. Please contact Ian Mann or James Thatcher at The Terrapin, telephone 01603 671400.**

### **Definitions / Models of Stress**

We all have an understanding of what is meant by stress, which is unsurprising if one considers how frequently 'stress' is discussed in day-to-day conversations, newspaper / magazine articles and television documentaries. In addition, we are all likely to have experienced some degree of stress at some point in our lives.

What is sometimes overlooked however, is the positive effect of stress. Psychological experiments have demonstrated increased motivation and performance in people experiencing moderate levels of stress compared to those experiencing no stress at all. As stress levels increase past a critical point however, performance begins to decrease. This is best explained using the diagram below.

Diagram 1. The Yerkes-Dodson Curve



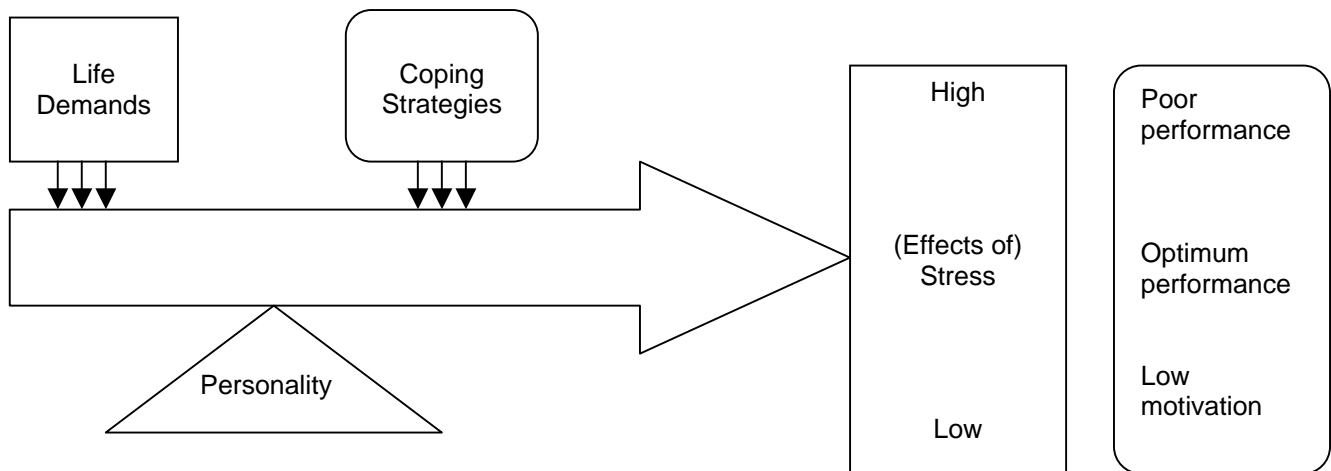
The term stress, as used in every day conversations, would appear to refer specifically to higher stress levels and the associated negative effects this can have upon one's emotional well-being and performance.

Many researchers have attempted to define this 'problem stress', although no agreed definition exists. A common feature in many definitions is the idea of a person and their interaction (or ability to cope) with their environment. Problem stress might therefore be regarded as a situation where somebody's life demands are greater than their ability to cope with those demands, i.e.

$$\text{STRESS} = \text{Life Demands} > \text{Ability to Cope}$$

This can best be explained using the diagram below, adapted from Trevor Powell (19)

Diagram 2 The balance between life demands and coping strategies



American psychologist Richard Lazarus (1966), believed stress to be directly related to *change* and a person's ability to cope with that change. In relation to diagram two, we might think of periods of change as a temporary imbalance where new and unfamiliar demands outweigh our usual or current coping strategies.

These theories go some way to explaining why adolescence can be a particularly stressful time for many individuals. Not only do they experience many changes in their physical, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual development, they may confront increased demands in both the home and school setting, and may also have yet to develop appropriate coping strategies.

## **Prevalence / Facts Figures**

Most people would agree that both the prevalence and levels of stress are increasing, and research would appear to support this view. A recent study (1) indicated that 20% of Britons feel “very stressed” at least once a day. In addition, more than 50% of those surveyed claimed to feel more stressed than they did 5 years ago.

## Sources of Stress (Life Demands)

Demands can be placed upon us from a wide range of sources, including school / work, families, peers, society, the media and even ourselves. Identification of specific stressors is difficult, given the subjectivity involved, however common examples identified in surveys of young people included school work (and exams), relationships inside and outside the family, bullying and future prospects. Similarly, common stressors for adults include work pressures, relationship difficulties (including partners, parents and children), financial concerns and minor legal problems. The impact of environmental demands such as noise, heat / cold, and over-crowding should not be overlooked, especially in many school environments.

## Effects of Stress

We have already seen the detrimental effect high levels of stress can have upon ones performance levels. In addition, prolonged periods of stress can affect us in the following areas:

**Psychological:** e.g. difficulty concentrating, making decisions or 'turning off'; forgetfulness; sensitive to criticism or overly self-critical; reduced temper control, feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, guilt; & shame.

**Physical:** in the short term this might include increased heart rate; muscular tension; breathing difficulties; nausea; fatigue; palpitations; skin irritation; dry mouth and sweating. More seriously, in the longer term this might lead to raised blood pressure, heart disease; strokes; stomach ulcers; migraines / headaches; Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

**Behavioural:** e.g. atypical sleeping patterns; aggression; excessive drinking / eating / smoking; loss of appetite; avoidance of particular situations; inactivity, increased isolation, poor personal presentation; development of nervous habits (e.g. nail biting)

If we experience or observe such factors, especially when this is not usually the case, this may be indicative of high stress levels in ourselves, our colleagues or our pupils.

## **What can schools do to support children and young people?**

Preventative, whole-school interventions are key in ensuring the mental health of pupils, and in preventing stress from reaching problem levels. Generic, whole-school measures outlined below are particularly relevant.

- Develop an ethos which values and respects all individuals
- Use the DCSF national guidance on mental health difficulties to develop clear procedures, that are known to all staff, for identifying and supporting pupils
- Take bullying and pupils' difficulties with relationships seriously and provide swift resolution of problems
- Offer and make known formal arrangements for listening carefully to pupils' views
- Ensure that children and young people can take responsibilities for aspects of school life such as Peer Support networks
- Ensure that the curriculum offers opportunities to support emotional health and well-being and in particular emotional literacy
- Consider how the environment can be improved to ensure children feel safe
- Work collaboratively with parents and outside agencies in identifying problems and making provision for children.

In addition, schools should identify potentially difficult periods in the year, for example where considerable changes occur (e.g. following a change of year group / key stage) or when increased demands are placed upon pupils (e.g. through exams or coursework). Coping strategies such as those outlined below could then be taught, modelled and practised in preparation for these times.

## **What can I do as an individual teacher?**

- Find time to observe and listen to children and young people and get to know them
- Be alert to changes in behaviour and take them seriously

- Share your concerns with others and plan ways forward
- Work closely with parents
- Know where the sources of support both in and outside school are and how to refer to these if necessary

## **Managing Stress (our own and that of our pupils)**

In relation to the model of stress presented in diagram 2, strategies intended to manage high stress levels can be viewed in terms of redressing any imbalance that may be present. In other words, strategies should aim to increase coping strategies, decrease demands or ideally both. The following coping strategies can be developed and adapted for use with both adults and pupils (to a greater or lesser extent).

### Coping Strategies

**Understanding Stress** helps you feel more in control of the stressful situation. It may help you to recognise particularly stressful activities or periods, and enable you to anticipate and plan for these events.

**Goal Planning-** Identify and prioritise goals relating to all aspects of your life (e.g. home and work), and formulate a staged actions plans for individual goals ensuring you include rewards for achieving these goals. As with pupil's IEPs, you should try to make goals SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timed- e.g. by Easter I will...).

**Time Management-** Plan to undertake set activities at set times during the week. You may want to tackle more demanding tasks at times of the day when you know you can work better- for most people this is the morning. Always try to leave planned space in your timetable to accommodate any unexpected demands, and avoid procrastination.

**Healthy Lifestyle-** Regular exercise helps to release muscle tension and adrenaline associated with high levels of stress. Hormones such as endomorphines are released during exercise and are reported to act as a natural anti-depressant. Exercise helps you to relax, lowers blood pressure and improves the body's immune system. A balanced diet can improve and increase our performance, and help strengthen our immune system.

**Relaxation Training-** The muscle tension that accompanies high levels of stress can lead to headaches, back aches etc. which in turn can cause us more stress. Feelings of relaxation and tension cannot occur simultaneously, but relaxing is not always easy. By teaching the body how to relax, we can help eliminate or alleviate physical tension. Exercises relating to our muscles (and breathing) can help us to relax, and are well documented in stress-related literature.

**Clear Support Structures-** Formalise any within-school support procedures currently in place and make these known to staff, pupils and parents. This could consider between-staff support, between-pupil support (e.g. Peer Support) and staff-pupil support. Staff should also be aware of the external support available in addressing more persistent or serious issues, including School Support Teams, GPs and the counselling service provided by the Norfolk Support Line (0800 169 7676).

## Resources / References

1. Powell, T (2006) *The Mental Health Handbook- Revised Edition*. Speechmark ISBN 0-86388-330-3
2. Adair, A., Ducker, C., Mann, I., Sarmezey, J. (2007) *So Sad, So Young, So Listen- Mental Health Fact Sheets*. Norfolk EIPSS PHEW Team (01603 671400)
3. Gutman, J. (1988) *The Stress Workbook*. Sheldon
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7. Wilson, P (2003) *Young minds in our schools*. Young Minds ISBN 0 –9545123-5-9
8. Social Emotional Aspects of Learning materials