

Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

TRENDS



"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."

When the brain is under stress and resorts to fight/flight/freeze mode, higher order executive functioning skills are inaccessible.

To learn more:

- Anxiety and Stress Disorders – A guide to managing panic attacks, phobias, PTSD, OCD, social anxiety disorder, and related conditions. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)
- Helping a Child Manage Fears – Includes tips for helping your child and a list of common childhood reactions to trauma. (Sidran Institute)
- Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children (PDF) – Booklet aimed at parents or caregivers of children who've experienced traumatic stress. (Bright Horizons Foundation)

MINDFULNESS: TRAINING THE BRAIN

A growing body of research suggests that students who practice mindfulness experience improved attention and focus, and obtain better grades. Students who regularly engage in these practices display improved emotional regulation, fewer behavioral problems, increased capacity for empathy and perspective taking, and better social skills.

Mindfulness Changes Brain Function

Studies suggest that when students are taught to engage in mindfulness practice, the brain's "fight or flight" center, the amygdala, appears to shrink. This primal region of the brain, associated with fear and emotion, is involved in the initiation of the body's response to stress. As the amygdala shrinks, the pre-frontal cortex, associated with higher order brain functions such as awareness, concentration and decision-making grows.

The "functional connectivity" between these regions, how often they are activated together, also changes. The connection between the amygdala and the rest of the brain gets weaker, while the connections between areas associated with attention and concentration get stronger.

Managing Stress

Mindfulness (present-moment, nonjudgmental awareness) is a powerful tool that students can use to manage their stress. When students consistently practice mindfulness, it lowers rates of anxiety and depression, and leads to better sleep, stronger relationships, and increased self-awareness, all of which can go a long way toward ameliorating the impact of stress.

Teach Students to Expect Stress

Students who learn to expect stress experience less of it. Educators can help students understand that their stress is an entirely normal reaction to a challenge. It's not their fault or something they've done wrong. There are many simple things they can do in order to feel better. Spending a few moments deliberately attending to the breath can lower the heart rate, and often has a calming effect on the mind and body.

Managing Self Talk

A big part of what stresses us out is the story we tell ourselves about what's happening. Encourage students to stop when they are stressed, and ask themselves, "What's the story?" Is she telling herself she'll fail the test, or that no one likes her? Ask if she can drop the story, and just notice what is actually happening.

Awareness of the Positive

When we're stressed, it puts the brain in a fearful state, and therefore we start to pay more attention to threats, which only makes the stress worse! Encourage your student to notice the things that are good, or even just okay, right now. Challenge stressed students to go through day and notice ten things that are beautiful, helpful, kind, or pleasant.

Awareness of Thoughts and Feelings

A major component of stress and unhappiness is the feeling that "I'll ALWAYS be miserable." With mindfulness, we come to understand that no emotion lasts forever. When you pay close attention to it, an emotion is actually a constantly shifting combination of sensations and thoughts and feelings and memories. No two seconds of your emotional experience are identical.

Take a Break from Technology

Electronic devices contribute to our stress in numerous ways: they distract us from our direct experience, the emails and notifications aggravate our worries, and social media contributes to stress. Encourage your students to pay attention to how spending time on their devices makes them feel. Encourage them to take frequent breaks (minimum 20 minutes at a time) when there's no technology. Disconnecting from technology reconnects you to your experience!