**Course: Promoting staff wellbeing**

**Unit 3: Managing stress**

**Overview**

**Aims and outcomes**

This unit aims to open constructive and honest dialogue about stress and the best ways to manage it. It is a wonderful opportunity for the SLT to demonstrate how much they value their staff and together build strong supportive structures which will encourage outstanding performance in the classroom. Stress is often perceived as bad. However, this unit serves to highlight how important stress is as a natural mechanism to keep us alive and well. It will expose the seriousness of chronic long-term (low- and high-level) stress.

Participants will:

* appreciate their value as a staff member
* understand what stress is
* explore the causes of stress
* recognise stress signals
* develop strategies to counteract stress and build personal resilience
* have fun!

**Participants**

This unit is for all staff. It will be the decision of the SLT whether to include non-teaching support staff. In my experience it is valuable to include every staff member. This sends the message that everyone is valued and valuable to the smooth running of the school, and all have an important part to play in a successful school.

Stress (especially when it develops into mental ill health) holds a powerful stigma which may be a cause of resistance to being open during this training. The lead trainer and SLT must be aware of this and make allowances for delayed ‘buy-in’ from some members of staff. Continue to encourage full and honest participation from all staff. The best way to do this is to lead the way!

**How this fits in with whole-school improvement**

* Developing whole-school wellbeing.
* Raising the quality of teaching and learning.
* Improving financial resources management.

**Resources**

* PowerPoint presentation for Unit 3
* Handout 1.4: Stressors questionnaire
* Handout 2.4: ‘Good luck, bad luck?’
* Handout 3.1: Fight or flight
* Flipchart or whiteboard sheets and markers
* Digital camera to record outcomes
* Diaries for date of next meeting

**Timing**

This unit is designed to take 90 minutes. Depending on the size of your staff and their level of interaction, you may need some flexibility and feel you want to add a little extra time, say to two hours. Finish at the time you announce to the group.

**Rationale and background**

*Life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it.*

John C Maxwell

Everyone responds to situations differently. Some people are naturally more sensitive or easily excitable than others. Some people manage stress by holding everything in, some manage stress by letting everything out. There are no hard and fast rules about the best ways to approach and handle stress. I would, however, always promote a non-violent way both inwardly (to self) and outwardly (to others).

The key to understanding stress is to recognise that a situation is simply a situation. It is the meaning placed upon that situation that labels it as either peaceful or stressful.

Every situation is an opportunity to observe your perception and then challenge it if necessary. True balance comes when you genuinely appreciate there will always be two sides to every situation or experience. If one is able to challenge one’s preconceptions about a situation, one can learn to see a bigger picture. Time is a great teacher and often an experience that was originally considered terrible eventually turns out to be a wonderful opportunity.

Mindfulness is a helpful way to embrace life and manage the day-to-day pressures of work and home. This training is not specifically focusing on mindfulness; rather it employs some of the basic premises to create a secure and healthy foundation from which participants can choose their own wellbeing path.

Practise not-doing and everything will fall into place.

**Step 1: Rewards of teaching (20 minutes)**

Introduce the unit (5 minutes), thanking people for their attendance. Invite the headteacher or appropriate member of the leadership team (which may be you) to explain that this training has been initiated for the benefit of staff and the whole-school community. Impress upon them how much the SLT value their hard work, time and commitment, without which the school would not function.

Invite everyone to stand up and exchange with a colleague one reason why they love being a teacher. If there are groans of apathy and signs that they don’t actually love being a teacher any more, ask them to rewind the clock and remember why they became a teacher and what brings them alive in the classroom. Invite them to do this three times with a different colleague each time, sharing a fresh reason with each. Once seated, invite participants to share so that everyone can be inspired. Write the key words on the flipchart.

When complete, invite participants to share with the person next to them three reasons why their wellbeing is important to each category listed on **slide 3**. Make sure each person shares.

Complete this section by explaining the value of having the 3 entire staff speaking the same wellbeing language so that it positively impacts the whole-school environment; that is, it is a happy and healthy place to be. Happy teachers = enhanced teaching effectiveness and happy pupils = improved achievement. Share the SLT mission to prioritise wellbeing to improve work-life balance and raise standards. Recognise why it has been made a priority.

**Step 2: Stress: experience and perception (25 minutes)**

Give participants time to read the simple explanation in **Handout 3.1: Fight or flight**, the definitions of stress and examples on **slide 4**. Invite them to discuss, with a person they are comfortable sharing with, how they define stress and one example where their fight or flight instinct took over. Highlight the fact that the stress response occurs whether the stressor is real or imagined. The purpose of this discussion is to normalise the issue of stress and to help all participants recognise that everyone experiences stress.

Talk through **slide 5** on the perceptions of stress, and how reactions can impact on your ability to respond.

Distribute **Handout 2.4: ‘Good luck, bad luck?’**. Invite participants to contemplate their perceptions of enforced change.

Play the multitasking game! Put participants into groups of four in a + formation.

* Player one is the respondent. He or she must mirror the actions of player three and answer the alternating questions from players two and four.
* Player three makes fun big gestures, stretching, jumping, waving, etc.
* Player two asks simple maths questions: 1+1, 6 x 6, 20 – 10.
* Player four asks personal questions: ‘Are you married?’, ‘What size feet do you have?’, ‘Where did you go on holiday?’

The respondent has one minute in the hot spot. He or she must respond as fast and as accurately as possible. Player three must keep moving, players two and four must fire the questions as fast as possible but still giving player one a chance to answer. After one minute everyone moves clockwise one position.

After four turns every participant will have experienced being the respondent, the mirror, the mathematician and the inquisitor. Sound a very loud buzzer or hooter at the end of each minute to signal the end of each one minute round. Move the groups on immediately to the next respondent. Keep the activity tight and fast paced. The energy of urgency is the key.

It is helpful to give a demonstration (perhaps have four SLT members standing by). This will demonstrate the SLT’s commitment to raising wellbeing through genuine team spirit!

The purpose of the game is to experience time pressure and the challenge of multitasking. It is meant to be lots of fun. Usually there is lots of squealing and hilarity. Positively encourage each team – ‘come on, faster, more questions, keep going!’ It is meant to be an impossible task. It serves to highlight the foolhardiness of trying to do more than one thing at a time and the negative effects of time pressure and multi-layered demands.

Ask participants what they learned. Give time for feedback. Profound insights are often shared.

**Step 3: The route to stress (10 minutes)**

Explain the route to stress as on **slide 6**. Put simply, one cannot feel an emotion without thinking a thought first. Your body will respond to the thought with a body signal. You will respond with a corresponding emotion, which will trigger an action.

**Definitions**

Responsive: responding positively, healthily, mindfully in a calm, balanced and understanding manner

Reactive: reacting negatively, unhealthily, in an ill-considered, aggressive or passive aggressive manner

For example: Think a stressful, negative thought; your body will respond with constriction and fight or flight response. You will feel a negative emotion (anxious, frustrated or scared…) and potentially express the strong emotion by perhaps shouting, slamming a door or confronting someone.

Think a calming positive thought and your body will respond with expansion and the relaxation response. You will feel a positive emotion (content, calm, happy…). You are more likely to respond healthily with a smile, a wave or laughing.

Invite the same groups of four to apply the route to stress to the multitasking exercise and discuss whether they were responsive or reactive. What were they thinking? Distribute **Handout 2.4: ‘Good luck, bad luck?’**. Invite them to contemplate their perceptions of enforced change.

**Step 4: Mind-body connection (5 minutes)**

Invite the group to close their eyes and imagine preparing a slice of lemon to eat, or another experience, such as those listed on **slide 7**. Talk them through cutting the slice, holding the slice with their fingertips, putting the lemon up to their mouth, sucking the slice. Ask them to notice how their mouth reacts to their thoughts. Most people will experience mild salivation, sometimes tingly and the need to swallow.

Ask participants about their experience. Share the purpose of the exercise with them – to prove that the imagination will trigger a physical response as if it were real. Highlight how important it is to understand the power of thoughts and their influence on wellbeing.

Read out the second stress definition from **slide 7**.

**Step 5: Stressors and signals (15 minutes)**

Ask the groups to consider the questions on **slide 8** (what situations trigger your stress?) and invite each member of the group to share their answers. It is important each participant listens to the speaker without interjecting or interrupting during each share.

After everyone has shared they can spend a moment interacting and agreeing with the stress of life/school! Complete this step by asking for whole-group feedback. As trainer you can specify that the stressors are pertaining to school stressors or any area of their life. If the unit is going well, you may like to encourage school-specific stressors. It will be helpful to note these on a flipchart.

**Step 6: Personal strategies and plenary (15 minutes)**

Explain that coping strategies are as unique as our stress responses. Everyone will have a preferred coping strategy. Ask them to call a few out – a glass of wine, a hot bath, walking the dog.

Divide suggested strategies into two categories:

* Healthy/supportive
* Unhealthy/unsupportive.

Note on a flipchart. Invite participants to consider exploring strategies in the healthy/supportive column.

To begin a new wellbeing way of life in school, explain that you are going to close with a treat for their bodies! Choose a physical activity that you know your staff will participate in. Suggestions include a massage train, a simple dance, a series of stretches and a ‘shake out’ tension exercise. If you have a PE or dance specialist, ask them prior to the unit to prepare and lead a fun five minute stress reliever with some loud upbeat music such as James Brown’s *I feel good!* Be encouraging. Have fun. This will help build rapport and develop a new approach to whole-school wellbeing.

**Plenary**

The purpose of this plenary is for the whole staff to reflect on the unit, what they have learned about themselves and stress. Give them a few moments to share with a partner and then group-share the benefits of doing the unit and addressing the issue of stress in school. Remember to take photographs of all flipcharts from this unit for future planning.

**What’s next?**

Set the awareness challenge (self-observation task) which will lead into the next unit (**slide 10**).

You can follow up this unit by…

* distributing **Handout 1.2: My Stressometer**. Request participants keep a Stressometer log for at least one week.

**Alternative/additional development activity**

Partake in a whole-school stress audit using the Stressometer (**Handout 1.2**), **Handout 1.4: Stressors questionnaire** and other tools if required such as the TSN Stress test[[1]](#footnote-1) and the TSN Wheel of Wellbeing [[2]](#footnote-2).

**What’s changed?**

Evaluate the impact of the unit. Ask participants to complete the evaluation form if appropriate or simply discuss the benefits.

Before closing:

* Clarify the ‘homework’ and take any questions.
* Set date and time for next training. Ideally no more than a two-week interval. However, this will be dependent on your school’s unique influencing factors.
* Thank your staff for their participation, praise and affirm them for ‘playing full out.’

**Further reading**

Lovewell K, Every Teacher Matters, Ecademy Press, 2012

Richards M, Stress Pocketbook, Management Pocketbooks, 2009

1. http://www.teachersupport.info/tools/stress/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://teachersupport.info/tools/wheel-of-wellbeing/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)