

Working Effectively with Students and Adults Exhibiting Signs of Chronic Stress, Trauma or Mental Illness

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Facts You Need to Know

- One in five children in our nation has a diagnosable mental disorder.
- With the advent of COVID-19 more and more families are reporting significant symptoms of Mental Illness or trauma in their school-aged children

Students are Struggling

3

Assuming an even distribution, this would amount to four to six students per classroom with some form of chronic or acute mental health concern.
These numbers cut across SES, culture and academic ability levels.

Students are Stressed-Out

Stress Dysregulation (SDR) is a common manifestation in students with mental health concerns, but increasingly are appearing in undiagnosed students.

Symptoms of SDR include:

- Quick to anger
- Inability to self-regulate or calm themselves
- Sudden withdrawal from learning and social interactions

One In Five



OR

Eight In Ten



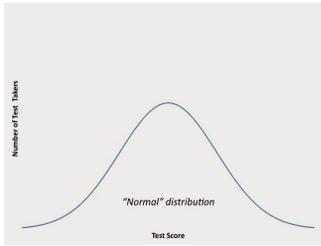
Teachers are Stressed-Out

- A new survey of more than 30,000 U.S. teachers finds that most of them report high levels of stress and low levels of autonomy.
 - 78% express overwhelming levels of stress.
 - Chronic stress is a primary contributor to the development of mental illness.

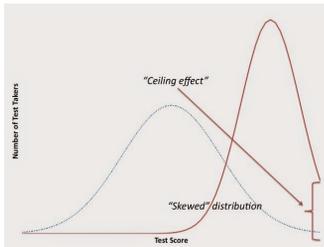
THE 78%

- Of the teachers reporting critical levels of stress:
 - 60% report significant symptoms of Anxiety
 - 38% report significant symptoms of Depression

Stress Levels and the Bell Curve



Stress Levels and the Bell Curve



Parents Are Stressed!

Similar to our students, **one in five adults** of childbearing age are managing mental health concerns of their own.

Similar to teachers, parents are struggling with significant work and life stressors of their own.

Results:

The chances of a significantly distressed parent having a significantly distressed child served by a chronically stressed teacher are **higher than anyone would like to believe!**

Who's the IP?

- So who is the IP?
 - Sometimes it's the parent.
 - Sometimes it's your staff.
 - Sometimes it's the principal.
 - But one thing is for certain...
 - It is never YOU!

Staff Wellness

Emotional Resilience

One's ability to adapt to stressful situations or crises.

- ❖ More resilient people are able to "bounce back" and adapt to adversity without lasting difficulties;
- ❖ Less resilient people have a harder time with stress and life changes, both major and minor.



Supporters and Saboteurs

Who are your current supporters? Who do you rely on to get perspective or find shelter from the storm?

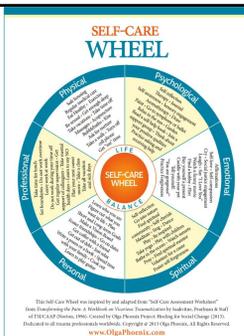
Who would you like to enlist to become part of your support group?

Supporters and Saboteurs

It is also valuable to reflect on your saboteurs.

They may be your inner critic, an unsupportive colleague or supervisor or an unhealthy habit you have developed.

If you know your saboteurs you can overcome them with the help of your support group.



Physical Self-Care

- Develop a regular sleep routine.
- Aim for a healthy diet with meal prep.
- Take lunch breaks.
- Go for a walk at lunch time.
- Walk your pets after work.
- Take a personal day.
- Exercise regularly.
- Bubble baths.
- Turn off technology.
- Others??

Psychological Self-Care

- Self-reflection
- Power words and affirmations
- Attitude of gratitude
- Journaling
- Therapy
- Engage in non-work hobbies
- Make/take time for relaxation
- Aromatherapy
- Make/take time to engage with friends and family
- Practice asking for and receiving help from others.

Emotional Self-Care

- Positive affirmations
- Reflective practices
- Be in nature
- Self-Compassion
 - "If you wouldn't say it to ____, don't say it to yourself."
- Laughter
- Say "I love you."
- Family game night.
- Imagery
- Practice forgiveness of self and others.
- Hug.



We need 4 hugs a day for survival.
We need 8 hugs a day for
maintenance. We need 12 hugs a
day for growth.

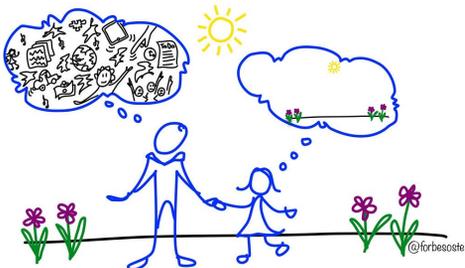
— Virginia Satir —

AZ QUOTES

Spiritual Self-Care

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Attend/recommit to your church, mosque, synagogue, temple, etc.
- Seek a spiritual community
- Sing, dance
- Study/read inspirational text
- Take time to watch the sunrise and sunset.
- Play like a child
- Be present with others.

Mind Full, or Mindful?



Personal Self-Care

- Identify what you want out of life.
- Make a plan
- Set short and long-term goals
- Create a vision board
- Foster existing friendships
- Prioritize close relationships
- Seek new friendships
- Take a nap
- Seek a personal or spiritual mentor
- Return to hobbies: write, cook, learn to play an instrument, color, garden, etc.
- Foster forgiveness in yourself and others.

Professional Self-Care

- Take your lunch!
- Take breaks!
- Create a calming spot for yourself and others
- Encourage and model positive practices for use with students and employees.
- Design and participate in team building activities.
- Set purposeful boundaries
- Be your colleague's keeper
- Leave work at work
- Use your personal days
- Seek out and encourage ways to bring the "FUN" into the workplace.

The Benefits of Practicing Self-Care

- Ability to develop and keep a fresh perspective
- Increased coping mechanisms or "bounce back"
- Increased integrity and dignity
- Enhanced creativity in dealing with challenges
- Increased health and vibrancy
- Increased self-confidence, balance and well-being
- Career satisfaction
- Improved personal and professional relationships
- It will make you a better parent, partner and professional.

Too Much? Let's Make it Simple

Size Up Stress In My Life

- How am I feeling today?
- Do I have a problem that could be stress related?
 - Have I become more short-tempered or irritable than I used to be?
 - Am I often tired or exhausted?
 - Am I having trouble concentrating?
 - Am I overeating or not eating healthy foods?
 - Am I smoking, eating, thinking, nagging or drinking too much?

A Simple Plan

What can I do today to relieve some of my stress?

- Connect with others
- Exercise
- Take a walk
- Watch a good movie
- Reach out to others
- Listen to music
- Others?
- Enjoy a cup of tea or coffee
- Meditate
- Breath deeply
- Say a prayer
- Create artwork
- Join a support group

Make a Plan and Commit

Identify the things you will do to take better care of yourself.

- I will take 15 minutes each morning to have a cup of coffee on my deck before leaving for work.
- I will get my steps in daily.
- I will prepare one meal a day from scratch.
- I will read one chapter in my Bible daily.

Working with People in Crisis

Myth #1

- Most Difficult People Are Struggling with Mentally Illness
 - Truthfully only a small fraction of the individuals you have difficulty with suffer from diagnosable mental health concerns.
 - But, it is much easier and safer to assume they are ALL in the midst of a mental health crisis.

Communicating Effectively

- Communicating effectively with a person exhibiting signs of chronic stress, trauma or mental illness is not about designing appropriate policy or a rigid practice.
- Working with them is a very "person centered" process that will be unique to each individual.

Myth #2

- If you could just empathize or sympathize with a person in crisis, you would be able to work with them more effectively.
 - **Empathize**- refers to understanding their experience and feeling what they feel.
 - **Sympathize**- refers to feeling sorry for them and taking pity on them.

Communicating Effectively

- A Strategic Problem Solving Model
 - Recognize the impairment.
 - Study the communication patterns of the individual.
 - Seek out the themes that drive them and their perceived needs.
 - Generate accommodations and adjust your communication style based on your observations.

Recognizing the Impairment

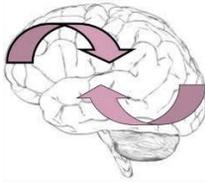
- Recognize the Impairment
 - Look for the evidence of reciprocity in communication.
 - Remember the "kind for kind" nature of human communication.
 - Mirror Neurons



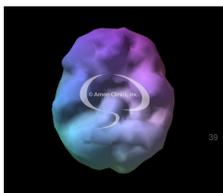
Recognizing the Impairment

- Recognize the Impairment
 - If it doesn't feel right at the onset something IS likely wrong.
 - If you start feeling frustrated by the interaction you may have missed your window to intervene early.
 - Frustration is quickly followed by other less fruitful feelings such as anger, fear, disgust and depression.

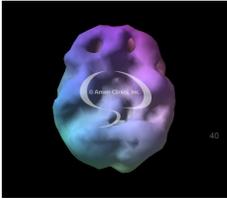
Top-Down VS. Bottom-Up Processing



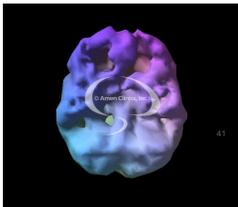
Top-Down Brain



The Brain Impacted by Chronic Stress



The Chronically Stress Brain Under Acute Stress



Study the Communication Patterns

- Study the communication patterns of the individual.
 - We are all generally predictable in our communication patterns.
 - People struggling with mental illness may appear unpredictable but are generally much MORE rigid in their adherence to specific patterns of communication.
 - Increasing levels of stress in the absence of any effective coping mechanisms typically results in diminished problem solving skills and communication on a largely emotional level.

Myth #3

- People in crisis are not in control of their actions.
 - The crisis they are experiencing will many times have exactly the opposite effect.
 - With decreased problem-solving skills and a limited ability to communicate, these individuals will attempt to compensate through increasing their level of control.
 - Until the level of their perceived stress is diminished, their attempts to control will block productive communication.

Myth #4

- People in crisis are better at organizing their thoughts and communicating their needs when you require them to follow specific timelines, adhere to meeting norms and follow specific agendas.
 - Uh, no.
 - Timelines tend to increase stress.
 - Stress makes you stupid.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYae3ZAAbLc>

Seek Out Themes

- Seek out themes that drive them and their perceived needs.
 - All communication is needs based.
 - Our failure to identify and meet the needs of these individuals will result in the continuation of the problem.
 - Think of how we respond to an infant's cry.
 - Until we figure out what the need is the crying will continue.
 - Meet the need and the crying stops.

Myth #5

- What a person in crisis asks for is synonymous with what they need.
 - This is a common misperception.
 - Need is not immediately obvious in people with limited communicative ability.
 - Often individuals will look for pain relief.
 - Think of what you do to relieve stress.

Myth #6

- Having a good relationship with a person who is chronically in a state of crisis is all you need to communicate effectively.
 - "Good" is a relative term based largely on the perception of the individuals in relationship.
 - Relationships can be maladaptive.
 - When a person is in a state of chronic crisis they see a good relationship as one in which you give them whatever they ask for.

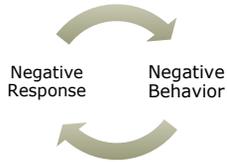
Before, During or After (BDA)

- You have power at three different times in the Response Cycle:
 - Before the interaction takes place.
 - During the interaction.
 - After the interaction has ended.

Adjust Your Communication Style

- Generate accommodations and adjust your communication style based on your observations.
 - As the individual in question is limited in their ability to respond, you are the one needing to adjust your communication style.
 - Embrace the Horror- you will need to take complete responsibility for figuring out the problem.

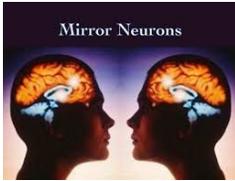
Negative Communication Cycles



Mirror Neurons: Our Friends and Our Foes

- Operation and Function
- Observation of an action automatically triggers simulation of that action.
 - Provide a neural basis for imitation and empathy (inner imitation)

Projector or Reflector



Projector or Reflector

Projector

- Influences others through conscious or unconscious behaviors.
- To have appropriate impact, it should be done consciously.
- May include emotion, body posture and strategic response to the specific behaviors of another.
- If overdone people may feel like they are not being heard or listened to.

Reflector

- Most natural response for all of us as it is hardwired into our brains.
- We reflect the mood and behaviors of others.
- Can be conscious or unconscious.
- Most effectively used to connect with people and make them feel listened to.
- Excellent communicators know when to reflect and when to project.

Projector - Strategic Response



Reflector As Active Listener

Reflecting what a person says to you:

- Allows the other to control the flow of the conversation.
- Shows your listening.
- Demonstrates acceptance of the other's beliefs.
- Makes the person feel understood.
- Reinforces and improves verbal communication.
- Reduces stress!

Negative Communication Cycles

- Arguing with a person in the midst of a personal crisis will always leave you feeling hopeless.
 - My Grandfather always said: "When you wrestle with a pig, both of you will get dirty, and only one of you will enjoy it."
 - To be clear the "pig" is the state of crisis, not the person you are working with!



Myth #7

- You should never confront a person in the midst of a crisis because of their fragile nature.
 - Confrontation is a necessary component of any team process.
 - The method of confrontation may need to be adapted according to the needs of the individual.

Defining Mental Illness

- Adults and children with mental illness have long been the victims of severe social stigmas, based on the assumption that they had a moral deficiency.
- Today, professionals recognize that most individuals with mental illness suffer from a biological imbalance of the chemicals in the brain; this is why many medications are effective in treating mental illness.

Our Perceptions Matter!

Remember BDO!

- What we **Believe**
- Influence the **Decisions** we make
- Which determine the **Outcomes** we experience.

What Do You Believe?

- About someone who is:
 - Inattentive?
 - Disorganized?
 - Aggressive?
 - Loud?
 - Questioning?
 - Complaining?

EXERCISE

What is happening in this picture?



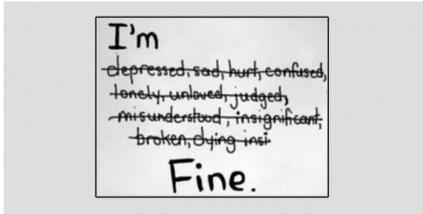
Mental Health Conditions

- Three Main Categories
 - Mood Disorders
 - Anxiety Disorders
 - Personality Disorders

Mood Disorders

- This family of mental health disorders is associated with Depression in all its varied forms including Dysthymia, Cyclothymia and Bipolar conditions.
- Myth
 - Depression = Sad or Withdrawn

Conditioned Response



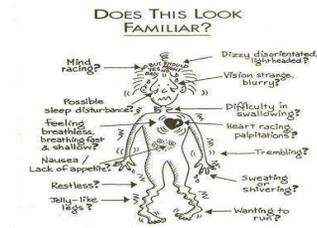
Things to Remember

- People suffering from A Mood Disorder may:
 - Feel close to tears at all times.
 - Demonstrate a lack of interest.
 - Have gone without sleep for days.
 - Be experiencing feelings of worthlessness and excessive guilt.
 - Have difficulties concentrating and making decisions.
- To communicate effectively:
 - Remain positive even when tears come. Pass the Kleenex.
 - Understand this is a symptom.
 - Be compassionate, they are stressed.
 - Stay focused on what can be done not on what they have failed to do.
 - Be direct, repeat as needed to assure understanding.

Anxiety Disorders

- This family of mental health disorders is associated with conditions like PTSD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Agoraphobia and various specific phobias.
- Myth
 - Anxiety = Timidity or Shyness

What's Really Going On?



Things to Remember

- People suffering from an Anxiety Disorder may:
 - Worry excessively about many things.
 - Feel keyed up or on the edge.
 - Have difficulty concentrating.
 - Be irritable.
- To communicate effectively:
 - Empathize with concerns related to student
 - Keep meetings small and short.
 - Again, be direct and repeat as needed.
 - Understand this is only a symptom.

Personality Disorders

- A Personality Disorder is an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that **deviates markedly** from the expectations of the individual's culture, is **pervasive and inflexible**, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and **leads to distress or impairment**.

Types of Personality Disorders

- Personality Disorders include:
 - Paranoid Personality Disorder
 - Schizoid Personality Disorder
 - Schizotypal Personality Disorder
 - Antisocial Personality Disorder
 - Borderline Personality Disorder
 - Histrionic Personality Disorder
 - Narcissistic Personality Disorder
 - Avoidant Personality Disorder
 - Dependent Personality Disorder
 - Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder
 - Personality Disorder NOS

Things to Remember

- These people truly are disabled.
- Personality Disorders are **pervasive and inflexible**.
- Avoid countertransference, emotional reactions either highly negative or empathetic that may result from working with a mentally ill person over time. Avoid allowing your feelings to dictate your responses to these individuals.

Dependent Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior related to an excessive need to be taken care of.
 - Recognize the Impairment.
 - Study Their Communication Patterns.
 - What Do They Need?
 - Generate Accommodations.

Histrionic Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking.
 - Recognize the Impairment.
 - Study Their Communication Patterns.
 - What Do They Need?
 - Generate Accommodations.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.
 - Recognize the Impairment.
 - Study Their Communication Patterns.
 - What Do They Need?
 - Generate Accommodations.

Borderline Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects and marked impulsivity.
 - Recognize the Impairment.
 - Study Their Communication Patterns.
 - What Do They Need?
 - Generate Accommodations.

Antisocial Personality Disorder

- Disorder is described as a pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others.
 - **RUN!**
 - Recognize the Impairment.
 - Study Their Communication Patterns.
 - What Do They Need?
 - Generate Accommodations.

Tools for Communicating Effectively

- Anything you learn about dealing effectively with a difficult person should be immediately passed on to staff working with the individual.
- Adopt a problem-solving model.
- Remember an emotional response on your part may feel right but it rarely leads to solution.
- Assume they are all in crisis and it will improve your communication skills with everyone.

Tools for Communicating Effectively

- Leave your ego and YOUR NEEDS at the door.
- Problem-solving is best accomplished in a team environment.
- Stay on center emotionally. An emotional response is an indicator of countertransference.
- End a conversations prior to reaching you or your team's tolerance threshold.

Tools for Communicating Effectively

- Celebrate your victories but remain vigilant.
- Don't just listen—study.
- Practice the giving of Grace regularly.
- Take care of yourself.

Resources.

Olga Phoenix, Vicarious Trauma Prevention Expert

[Free Self-Care and Life Balance Plan Tools](#)
