

# STRESS



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# What is Stress?

## Definition of Stress

“Stress is a physiological and psychological response to perceived challenges or threats. It occurs when external or internal demands exceed an individual’s ability to cope. This response activates the body’s stress systems, including the fight, flight, or freeze reaction, and can affect emotions, cognition, and behavior.”

Learn more

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company

# Inspirational activity: Traffic Light Reflection

**Background: Eustress (Positive Stress):** is manageable stress that boosts focus, performance and engagement.

**Distress (Negative Stress):** is negative, overwhelming stress causing anxiety and reduced performance. Distress occurs when students feel overwhelmed and unsupported, harming wellbeing and learning.

**Key Message:** Not all stress is bad. In this activity students and reflect on what signals indicate they are moving toward distress from eustress.

## Steps:

1. Draw a traffic light. Explain that:

Green= Eustress – feeling good, enough challenges and recovery time.

Yellow= Overdrive – demands exceed recovery, early signs of distress.

Red: Distress – exhaustion, hopelessness, burnout risk.

2. Ask students to work individually or in pairs to identify:

- Green: What does it look and feel like when you are balanced? (e.g., calm, focused, sleeping well)
- Yellow: What are your personal warning signs? (e.g., irritability, trouble concentrating, skipping breaks)
- Red: What signals show you are overwhelmed? (e.g., fatigue, anxiety, withdrawal)

3. Discuss as a group:

- How can you act when you notice yellow signs?
- What helps you stay in green?

4. Optional: Create a personal traffic light chart for each student with their own signals and coping strategies.

# Inspirational activity: The Wheel

Help students reflect on what gives them energy, what drains it, and how they can recover—based on evidence-based recovery strategies.

Materials: Paper and pens (Optional: a printed wheel template with sections for energy sources, drains, and recovery strategies)

## Description

Just like a car needs fuel and well-functioning wheels to move forward, you need energy and balance to feel good and perform well. If your “wheel” gets a flat tire or runs out of fuel, it’s hard to keep going. This activity helps you identify what keeps your wheel strong and what might cause flat tires.

## Steps

1. Draw a Wheel
2. Divide the wheel into sections: Energy Sources, Energy Drains, Recovery Strategies.

## Reflect and Fill In

- Energy Sources: What gives you energy? (e.g., sleep, friends, hobbies, exercise)
  - Energy Drains: What makes you feel tired or stressed? (e.g., too much homework, lack of sleep, conflicts, too much screen time)
  - Recovery Strategies: What helps you recharge? (e.g., taking breaks, listening to music, talking to someone, mindfulness)
3. Balance Check: Is your wheel balanced? Is there areas of flat tires which need attention? How do you notice when your energy is running low? (e.g., irritability, trouble focusing)?
  4. Action Plan: What is one small change you can make this week to strengthen your wheel? Example: Go to bed 30 minutes earlier, take a walk after school, or reduce screen time before bed.

# Inspirational activity: A collaborative workload map

## Step 1: Map Out the Workload

Create an overview of all planned tests, major assignments, and projects for each class. Involve other teachers in a shared calendar (digital or physical).

## Step 2: Coordinate and Prioritize

Limit to one major test per week whenever possible. Schedule large assignments at least 3–5 days apart from tests. Avoid multiple subjects having deadlines on the same day.

## Step 3: Create a Visual Schedule

Use a color-coded calendar:

- Red = Tests
- Blue = Major assignments
- Green = Regular homework.

Make the schedule visible to students (classroom board or online platform).

## Step 4: Communicate and Stay Flexible

Inform students well in advance about any changes. Conduct a “stress check” monthly where students provide feedback. Adjust the schedule if workload becomes too heavy.

Step 5: Use Digital Tools for sharing the schedule. Add deadlines to a shared calendar accessible to all teachers.



## Example of mindfulness activity; Count to Five

Duration: 5–10 minutes

Materials: None required (optional: quiet space)

Description:

This calming exercise helps students ground themselves in the present moment by focusing on their senses. It can be done individually or as a group. Students identify:

1. Five things they can see
2. Four things they can touch
3. Three things they can hear
4. Two things they can smell
5. One thing they can taste

Encourage students to take their time and notice details. This sensory awareness technique reduces anxiety and promotes calmness.

Why:

To help students manage stress, increase mindfulness, and improve focus by connecting to their immediate environment.



## Example of mindfulness activity; Star Breathing

Duration: 3–5 minutes

Materials: None

Description:

Students use their hand as a guide for breathing. They trace their hand like a star, inhaling as they slide up each finger and exhaling as they slide down. “Take 5 Breathing” works anywhere because you always have your hand with you!

Steps:

- Stretch your hand out like a star.
- Place the pointer finger of your opposite hand at the base of your thumb, ready to trace.
- Slowly slide up each finger and down the other side.
- Inhale through your nose as you slide up; exhale through your mouth as you slide down.
- Continue until you have traced your entire hand.
- Repeat as needed.

Why: Combines tactile movement with focused breathing for a calming effect. Kahneman (2011) describes stress through out our two cognitive systems. Stress causes system 1 dominance, leading to impulsive responses and reduced thoughtful decisionmaking. Mindfulness activates system 2, improving focus and reducing stress.

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