

Effective Interventions for Addressing Student Anxiety and Emotional Distress

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AGENDA

- Distress is a normal part of life
- How we cope with distress is important
- How do families and schools work together to build resilience?

Distress is Normal

- Novelty is part of childhood
- Failure is a part of childhood
- Disappointment is a part of childhood

Children's development is centered on learning how to manage the reality of living with these emotions

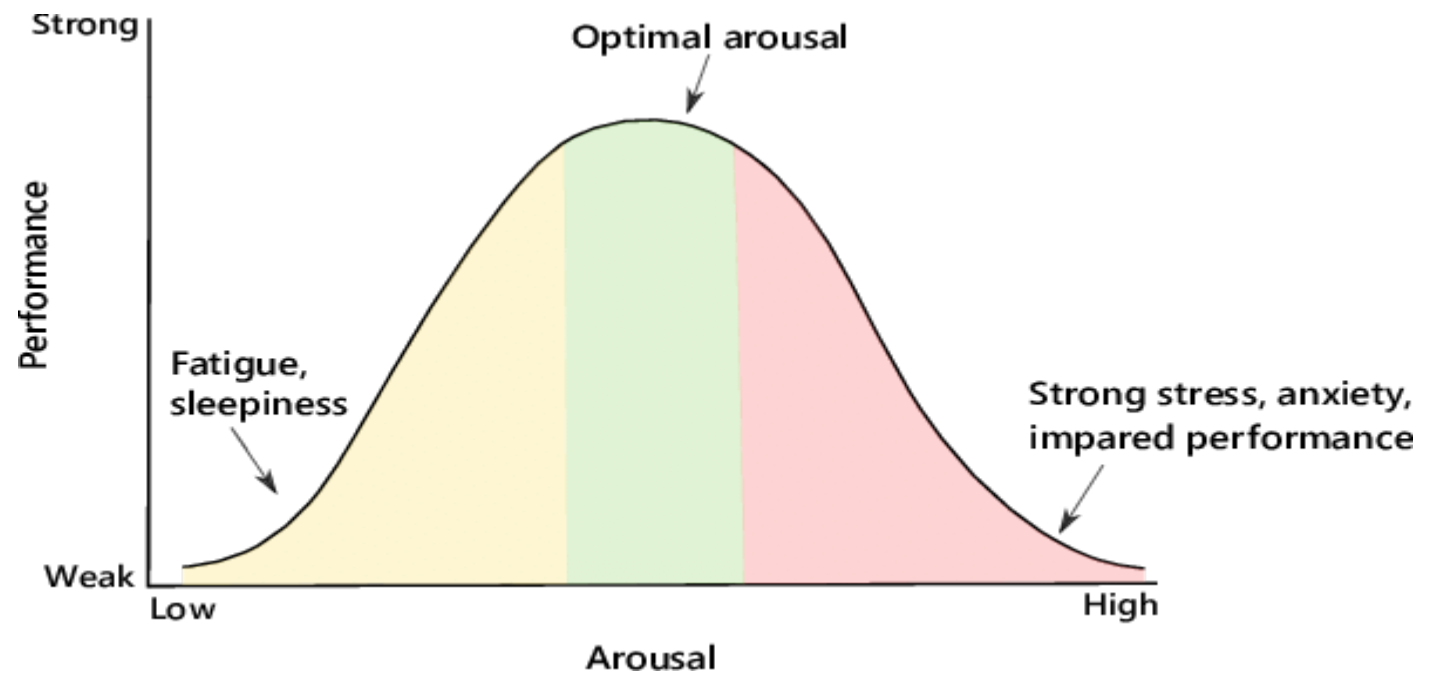
Distress is Normal

- New teachers
- New curriculum
- Social conflict and rejection
- Academic mistakes

The classroom is filled with opportunities to experience distress!

Distress is
Normal

Link: [Overview Article](#)



Yerkes-Dodson Law

What does it mean to cope?

Coping is to engage in a behavior that allows the individual to reduce emotional distress:

Adaptive Coping – engaging in a behavior that reduces distress, allowing the individual to face the distressing situation

Avoidance Coping – engaging in a behavior that reduces distress through moving away from the distressing situation

Adaptive Coping

Thinking Tools

- Identifying and changing unhelpful thoughts
- Finding the positive – What can I gain from this experience?
- Noticing and celebrating success
- Focusing on what we can control – building agency

Adaptive Coping

Behavior Tools

How can I take an **EFFECTIVE BREAK?**

- What behaviors make me more able to face distress?
- What can I do to reduce my physiological arousal?
- What can I do to be more open to thinking tools?

**AN EFFECTIVE BREAK LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR EACH
INDIVIDUAL!**

Avoidance Coping

A Powerful Impulse

- Distress is our bodies way of telling us something isn't ok
- Evolved for survival – distress focuses our attention
- Times have changed, emotional processing has not

IT IS HARD TO GO AGAINST THESE EMOTION MESSAGES!

Avoidance Coping



I CAN AVOID THIS!

Avoidance Coping

The Avoidance Coping Cycle



Avoidance Coping

Avoidance Works...In the Short Term

- Powerful reduction in experienced distress
- May experience other negative feelings (e.g. shame) but not as intense
- Creates association between environment and distress
- Can build dependence on co-regulation

Avoidance Coping

Avoidance Behavior Types

- **Overt situational avoidance** – I am not doing it!
- **Emotion driven behaviors** – I am outta here!
- **Subtle behavioral avoidance** – Avoid eye contact and hope for the best
- **Cognitive avoidance** – I am going to check my Instagram for the 10th time
- **Safety signals** – I need my friend with me to feel ok

Building Resilience

What Can Schools do to Build Resilience Skills?

- Build strong relationships with students
- Educate students on stress and avoidance
- Explicitly teach adaptive break strategies
- Preview and normalize distress
- Allow students opportunities to take a break in the classroom
- Provide short-term accommodations for significant distress until adaptive skills have been built

Building Resilience

What Can Schools do to Build Resilience Skills?

Schools need to balance accommodation with skill building

- Building resilience means facing and overcoming distress
- Accommodations reduce distress so that the student can face it...but it still has to feel bad!
- Just because it works doesn't mean it should stay

Building Resilience

What Can Parents do to Build Resilience Skills?

****DISCLAIMER****

- I am a parent of two children
- They experience distress
- Their distress can give me distress
- They will ask for reassurance, and ask, and ask
- I am highly motivated for them to not be in distress
- I will engage in parenting behaviors that reduce short-term distress

Building Resilience

What Can Parents do to Build Resilience Skills?

- Validate and cheerlead
- Focus on distress tolerance, not absence
- Balance accommodation with exposure
- Practice independent coping when calm (family ritual)
- Find and explore successful distress tolerance
- Ask the school – what is your plan to build the skills to reduce this accommodation?

The False Alarm Metaphor

