



ST PAUL'S SCHOOL
Est. 1509

**Mental Health and Wellbeing
Assembly Plans
What is stress?**

[Click here to access the PowerPoint that can be used to accompany these speaker notes.](#)

Material taken from [Mind UK](#)

Speaker Notes:

Warm up activity; ask the audience to identify the top 5 causes of stress according to the American Psychological Association. Once you've revealed the answers you can explain that amongst young people the number one source of stress is generally considered to be exam pressure and fears about their future

What is stress?

We all know what it's like to feel stressed, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. When we say things like "this is stressful" or "I'm stressed", we might be talking about:

- **Situations or events that put pressure on us** – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens.
- **Our reaction to being placed under pressure** – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with.

There's no medical definition of stress, and health care professionals often disagree over whether stress is the cause of problems or the result of them. This can make it difficult for you to work out what causes your feelings of stress, or how to deal with them.

Is stress a mental health problem?

Being under pressure is a normal part of life. It can be a useful drive that helps you take action, feel more energised and get results. In fact, a certain amount of stress is good for you; it motivates you to achieve your goals, overcoming stressful situations can build your future resilience and there's even some evidence to suggest it can boost your brain power.

Introduce the stress curve below to the audience. Explain that stress levels are shown on the X axis and performance levels on the Y axis.

If you have a manageable group, you could ask students where they think they are on the curve at the present moment? You might also like to get them to consider where they think they should be during the holidays or the night before a big exam.

The trick to managing stress is to keep yourself in the yellow section in the middle where we feel satisfied. This is where we're at our most creative, where we are better problem solvers and in a school setting probably where we will do best work. If we get too stressed and move into the blue zone, our performance tends to drop off. This is when we might start to get overwhelmed by stress and where these feelings could start to be a problem for you.

How to know if you're stressed?

Depending on numbers, you could split your audience in three and ask each section to talk to their neighbour considering one of either the behavioural signs of stress (how what you do might change?), the physical signs of stress (changes to your body) and the emotional signs of stress (how what you think and feel might change?)

Ask for feedback from the audience and compare against the full list of signs shown in the presentation. (Note: list does reference sexual problems; ensure this is appropriate for your audience)

What Causes Stress?

Feelings of stress are normally triggered by things happening in your life which involve:

- being under lots of pressure
- facing big changes
- worrying about something
- not having much or any control over the outcome of a situation
- having responsibilities that you're finding overwhelming
- not having enough work, activities or change in your life

There might be one big thing causing you stress, but stress can also be caused by a build-up of small challenges. This might make it harder for you to identify what's making you feel stressed, or to explain it to other people.

The amount of stress we feel in different situations can depend on:

- **our perception of the situation** – this might be connected to our past experiences, our self-esteem, and how our thought processes work (for example, if we tend to interpret things positively or negatively)
- **how skilled we are at** dealing with pressure and our emotional resilience to stressful situations

We're all different, so a situation that doesn't bother you at all might cause someone else a lot of stress. For example, if you're feeling confident or usually enjoy public speaking, you might find that giving a speech in front of people feels comfortable and fun. But if you're feeling low or usually prefer not to be the centre of attention, this situation might cause you to experience signs of stress.

What to do if you think you might be stressed?

There are lots of things you can do to build your resilience to stress and you can also prepare yourself to deal better with pressured situations.

Explain that future assemblies will deal with building resilience and dealing with pressure/self-care

There are many organisations, many specifically for your people, who can offer you support or advice if you're feeling stressed

Show list of useful contacts and support options

You might also like to highlight support mechanisms within your school at this point (i.e. can pupils book appointments with a counsellor? Do you offer mindfulness sessions? Is there a designated person pupils should talk to about Mental Health issue?)

Useful Contacts

Be Mindful

bemindful.co.uk

Information about mindfulness and mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR). Guidance on how to learn mindfulness, including course listings.

Big White Wall

bigwhitewall.com

An online community of people who are finding it hard to cope. It's completely anonymous so you can express yourself openly.

Mind Tools

mindtools.com

Information on topics including stress management and assertiveness.

Stressbusting

stressbusting.co.uk

Information about stress and techniques for coping. Lists several talking treatments and alternative therapies that can be used to treat stress.

Supporting Materials

Figure 1. The Causes of Stress

Top 5: Sources of Stress

What causes our stress? In an annual survey by the American Psychological Association, here are the top sources of stress, and the percentage of respondents who identified each as a "very significant" source of stress.

1 Money	76%
2 Work	70%
3 The economy	66%
4 Family responsibilities	59%
5 Relationships	55%

Source: APA Stress In America survey, 2010 (most recent stats available)

Figure 2. The Stress Curve

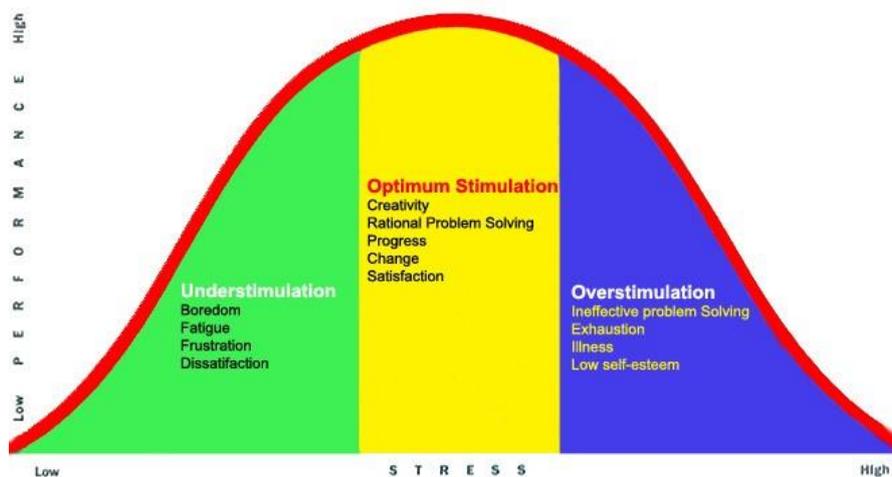


Figure 3. Signs that you might be stressed

How you might feel

- irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- over-burdened
- anxious, nervous or afraid
- like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- unable to enjoy yourself
- depressed
- uninterested in life
- like you've lost your sense of humour
- a sense of dread
- worried about your health
- neglected or lonely

How you might behave

- finding it hard to make decisions
- avoiding situations that are troubling you
- snapping at people
- biting your nails
- picking at your skin
- unable to concentrate
- eating too much or too little
- smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual
- restless, like you can't sit still
- feeling tearful or crying

How you might be physically affected

- shallow breathing or hyperventilating
- you might have a panic attack
- blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- problems getting to sleep, staying asleep or having nightmares
- sexual problems, such as losing interest in sex or being unable to enjoy sex
- tired all the time
- grinding your teeth or clenching your jaw
- headaches
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- indigestion or heartburn
- constipation or diarrhoea
- feeling sick, dizzy or fainting