

HOW VIRTUES CAN HANDLE STRESS



SESSION 1: My attitude to stress.

1. Stress: exploring the concept.

- * Ask students in small groups to write down the things/people/situations that cause them stress.
- * Ask students to write down the symptoms of stress: when they feel stressed, what does it feel like in terms of their body, their mind and their behaviour?
- * Discuss what the students have come up with.

2. So what is stress then?

- * Based on the discussion of causes and symptoms of stress, ask students to come up with either a definition of stress or some kind of visual image representation of it (e.g. an elastic band starting to split apart).
- * Share ideas.

3. Stress: good or bad?

- * Pose students the question: 'stress: good or bad?' There are some good, accessible articles on the effects of chronic stress online, e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronic_stress and <http://psychcentral.com/lib/the-physical-effects-of-long-term-stress/000935> [both available 02/15].
- * Discuss.
- * Now challenge students to come up with as many arguments as possible about both the positive and negative roles that 'stress' can play in their lives, e.g. on the positive side, it can focus our attention and force us to 'get things done'; on the negative, it can overwhelm us and make us ill!

- * Discuss. How easy did they find it to come up with reasons for stress being a good thing? What do the students notice about the ease/difficulty of doing this? What does this tell us about our cultural understanding of stress?

4. Refining our definition.

- * Give the students some stimulus on the idea of vaccines and how they work. A good example can be found here on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abBpWqFV7kw> [available 02/15]
- * Ask students if there are any similarities between vaccines and stress? Are there precise similarities (e.g. with the 'memory' function of the immune system in dealing with antigens)?
- * Give students the definition of stress and the comments about neurological inoculation from John Ratey. Ask them to discuss in small groups whether they agree or disagree with what he says, and why? Does the phrase 'in limited doses' have any importance? Why? Is there any danger in viewing stressful situations as acting as inoculation (e.g. being glib about the presence of stress in our lives and patronising those experiencing it by the unwelcome imposition of suggestions about the benefits of undergoing stress)?

5. Review.

- * Ask students if their understanding of stress has changed in the light of this session. In what ways?



SESSION 2: Morality and stress.

1. Review of prior learning.

- * Ask students to remind themselves of the definitions of stress from the previous session.
- * Ask students to work in small groups to discuss whether any questions have emerged for them in the light of their learning.
- * Work through any questions they have.

2. What is a moral question again?

- * Ask students if they can remember what makes a moral question different from other types of question (they are questions concerning what one 'ought' to do: they concern good/bad and right/wrong and are principally about what actions result in harm: a good resource on this can be found here: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasoning-moral/> [available 02/15])
- * Remind students of some of the different tools we have for resolving moral questions:
 1. What are the **consequences** of my action?
 2. What implications does this action have for my **character**?
 3. What **rules, duties, principles or values** relate to this action?

3. Does stress raise moral questions?

- * Give students the statement 'the main duty of parents is to protect their children from stress.' Ask them, in small groups, to work through the

following 3 questions related to it:

1. Is this a moral issue? Why?
2. What are your opinions about this statement?
3. Using the moral tools, can you come up with reasoned arguments about this statement?

There is some nice stimulus from the Cutting Edge documentary 'Cotton Wool Kids' on YouTube e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHbkEPnj0cE> and this article from Time <http://time.com/33438/6-things-overprotective-parents-do-wrong/> [both available 02/15].

- * Discuss what students have come up with.
- * Ask students, in small groups, to consider what other moral questions are raised by the issue of stress.
- * Once groups have identified one or two questions, they should again use the moral tools (character, consequences, rules) to come up with a reasoned answer to the question they have identified.
- * Feedback some examples.

4. Review: is stress immoral?

- * Ask students to bring what they have learned and reasoned so far to the question 'is stress immoral?' They should try to develop nuanced answers, which demonstrate that stress is complex and subjective, whilst recognising that human communities may have moral responsibilities in minimising the harmful impact of stress.





SESSION 3: Performance virtues and stress.

1. Review: what are the benefits and harms of stress?

- * Ask students to remind themselves of what the benefits and harms of stress are.
- * Feedback and discuss.

2. Analysing stress.

- * Ask students to come up with one or two examples of the things that cause them stress.
- * Ask them to analyse each cause of stress using the simple cost – benefit process:
 1. What is happening?
 2. My response to what is happening.
 3. Who will benefit? How?
 4. What are the potential harms?
- * Ask students about the effect of identifying the potential benefits of a stressful situation. Does this help them to see it differently?

3. Feel the fear and do it anyway.

- * Look at part 2 of the analysis of stress. Once we have recognised benefits/harms in part 1 this may change how we feel about the situation, because we are thinking about it in a different way. The challenge here is to then identify what we can control in a stressful situation and what we can then do about what we can control.
- * Ask students to put their stressful situation through steps 5 and 6 of the process.
- * Obviously, there are times when we have recognised the benefits of a difficult situation, but we still feel the emotions related to stress, such as anger, fear, anxiety, sadness and so on. There may also be times when we are in an inescapable difficult situation where the benefits are obscure or absent. Ask students to put their situation through step 7 of the process and come up with the strategies (performance virtues) that they already

use to cope with challenging/stressful situations that they find themselves in.

- * Collate and discuss.
- * Ask students to evaluate which of these collated strategies would be most useful for them.

4. A C T: Active, Calming and Thinking strategies.

- * This part of the session is where guidance can be given on other approaches to managing the effects of stress. There are three main categories:
 - * **active approaches**, which seek to solve or respond to the situation;
 - * **calming approaches**, which seek to soften the impact of powerful emotions so that a constructive response can be formulated;
 - * **thinking approaches**, which seek to make the person aware of their thinking about the situation with a view to challenging inaccurate or inflexible thinking which is hampering a constructive response.
 - * An exceptionally good calming response to stress is mindfulness meditation. A particularly good introduction to this is Mindfulness by Mark Williams. There are some very good guided mindfulness resources available for download, as well as some good mindfulness apps for phones such as Headspace.
- ### 5. Review.
- * Ask students to identify at least one new method of managing stress that they have encountered this lesson that they will attempt to use to manage stress in the future.

¹ These are the so-called survival and burnout emotions mentioned in the emotions slate.

² These are covered in more detail in the resilience slate.



SESSION 4: Civic virtues and stress.

For this session, we have chosen two causes of stress for communities: gossip and status anxiety. You could choose others that are more apposite for your setting such as conflict or mistrust.

1. What causes stress in communities?

- * Ask students to try to work out all of the different factors that cause stress in communities.
- * Ask students to identify how individuals contribute to causing these stresses and how institutions and organisations contribute (e.g. in the workplace, individuals may contribute to collective stress by not doing their job properly, the company may contribute to collective stress by providing workers with poor conditions to work in).
- * Ask students to identify how actions that cause stress fall short of virtue: which virtues do they fall short of and in what ways?

2. Example of community cause of stress 1: gossip.

- * Ask students to talk to each other about their own experiences of gossip and its effects.
- * Ask students to identify how gossip causes stress in communities.
- * Ask them to apply the virtues to gossip and think about how each of the virtues could help us to counteract the harm that is done by gossip.

3. Example of community cause of stress 2: status anxiety.

- * Provide students with a handful of celebrity magazines to read through in groups. Ask them about the effect these magazines have on the following things: what they think is important;

how they feel about themselves; how they feel about what they have; and how they feel about their future.

- * Discuss as a class how celebrity magazines (and the wider culture of advertising, reality television and consumerism) affect how they feel about what society judges them on.
 - * Play this short video of Alain de Botton talking about status anxiety:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhpdWDyB0UY> (there is a longer and more detailed – and more humorous - TED talk about status anxiety here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtSE4rglxbY> [both available 02/15], which suggests some solutions to status anxiety).
 - * de Botton suggests part of the solution to status anxiety when he talks about snobbery. Snobs make big judgements about us based on small bits of information (such as the clothes we wear or the possessions we have). The antidote to snobbery is to recognise that these small pieces of information do not define the richness of our identity.
 - * Ask students to identify the things about them that a snob might use to judge them.
 - * Next, ask students to identify all the richness of their identity that makes them who they are apart from appearance/possessions. How can students use this awareness to combat the effects of social/media pressures and status anxiety?
- ### 4. Review.
- * Ask students to identify what they as individuals can do to reduce collective stress.





SESSION 5: Reflection.

1. Back to preconceptions.

- * Ask students to return to their ideas of stress before the start of this unit.
- * Has anything changed? What? What effect has this change in thinking had on them?

2. New habits.

- * Ask students to look back through the performance virtues of responding to stress: analysing it, ACT strategies, mindfulness.
- * Which (if any) of these have they adopted and what effect have they had? If they haven't adopted any new habits, why is this? Are they already capable of managing excessive stress and if so, how do they do it? If they are reluctant to try anything out, why is this?

3. Stress and virtue.

- * Ask students to think about which of the virtues they need in order to become better at managing stress.
- * Ask them also to think about which virtues they will develop by managing stress successfully.