Chill Out! Helping Gifted Youth Deal With Stress

by Terry Bradley

What is causing stress in our gifted youth? What specific skills can educators and parents impart to help them manage their stress? Stress is a very real presence in all of our lives. It can be even more intense for the gifted because of the nature of giftedness. Specifically, gifted individuals have the tendency to be more sensitive, more intense, more introspective, and more emotional. Growing up gifted is a qualitatively different experience. This can manifest itself in the complex way a gifted individual "feels" and emotes when confronted with stressful situations.

According to Baum and Nicols, the top five stressors of all adolescents and teens are: school, family issues, relationships, time management, and expectations. Also on the list are stressors such as peer pressure, popularity, money issues, responsibilities, competition, self-doubt, wanting to fit in, and worrying about safety and violence. As if these aren't enough issues for the typical teen to be concerned with, there are additional issues that, because of the nature of giftedness, can cause added stress in gifted adolescents and teens: overexcitabilities, asynchrony, higher expectations because of higher capability, lack of academic challenge, overscheduling themselves because they are good at so many things, perfectionism, difficulty finding true peers, and extreme concerns about justness and fairness. So, in addition to the typical stressors that all adolescents and teens experience, gifted individuals have in common an additional set of potential stress inducers. Consequently, on a continuum of stress inducers for all adolescents and teens, stress levels for the gifted have the potential to be higher, simply because there are more potential stress inducers.

Fortunately, Neihart's research on risk and resilience in gifted children (2002, p.117) shows that gifted kids have many inherent qualities such as problem-solving ability, intellectual curiosity, concern about moral issues, sense of humor, and self-efficacy that may contribute to their resilience. This can certainly serve as a protective factor when dealing with a long list of potential stressors, which may also be seen as risk factors. As parents and educators, an important charge of ours is to "help keep a gifted child on the developmental trajectory for positive outcomes." (Neihart, 2002, p. 116) Educating our youth about stress management skills can be an important link in the supportive scaffolding that will enable them to cope more effectively.

Baum and Nicols identified five areas in which stress manifests itself outwardly in stressed out kids:

- Physiological – headaches, stomachaches, nervousness, insomnia
- Emotional – excessive crying, lashing out, hostility, anger, violence
- Relational – conflicts with family and friends, withdrawal from others
- Mental – anxiety, panic, confusion, feeling threatened or frightened, apathy
- Spiritual – submission, no way out, helplessness

Virtually everyone has, at some point or another, personally experienced some of the above manifestations of stress. Experienced in moderation these are manageable and even expected. However, too much of any of these feelings, especially over an extended period of time, can be a problem. Extreme symptoms of stress can lead to conditions such as ulcers, nervous twitches, hair loss, migraines, relationship failures, drug abuse, heart disorders, weight problems, eating disorders, depression, and suicide. As concerned educators and parents of adolescents and teens, we certainly don't want their symptoms of stress to escalate and become extreme, to the point of severe health disorders, dependence on medication, substance abuse, or desolation. This is why we must teach children to manage and control their stress in order to prevent it from becoming overwhelming and a painful burden for them.

It is highly important that educators and parents acknowledge the added complexity of stress in gifted individuals and specifically teach these adolescents some stress management skills to combat stress. For example, think for a moment about the concept of manners. As parents, we have to actively model and teach our children about using appropriate manners in different situations and scenarios. They generally don't just inherit the awareness of proper social conventions. This same philosophy needs to be applied to teaching the skills of dealing with stress. Like manners, handling stress is a learned skill that needs to be taught and modeled. Though children are often told to "chill out," they are seldom instructed how to actually do it. How can we expect them to successfully go about "chilling out" if we haven't taught them what the tactics are for doing so?

A good place to begin is by utilizing ourselves as models. If we, as adults, call attention to and acknowledge our own stress, we can then explain to our children and students what specific strategies we are implementing in order to manage it and deal with it. This is a perfect illustration of teaching through example. We are giving them more tools for their toolbox. By acknowledging and calling attention to the fact that we are feeling stress, which is a universal emotion, we are also making it less taboo by "normalizing it."

We have all experienced the negative feelings associated with stress, but a healthy dose of stress can actually go a long way in inspiring us to perform at our highest level of ability, propel us into action, and provide an emotional gauge of how important something is to us. Highly stressful situations are generally areas of great importance to us that demand our attention. Examples might be a performance, a deadline, a test, an important gathering of significant others, an overabundance of work piling up on our desk, friends/relatives pressuring us into doing something we've been putting off. We all feel stress, but as basic a human behavioral response as it is, many of us try to hide the fact that we are feeling stress from our children. Why is this? It could be that we don't want to burden them, or we don't want them to think we can't handle it, or we feel it's too personal an experience. If our reaction is to ignore it or allow it to consume us, that is what our children see as a viable response to stress. If they see us reach for a glass of wine or a bowl of ice cream saying, "I need to unwind" or "I need a pick-me-up", they may internalize these responses as practical ways to cope with stress.

Consider the implications of handling it differently, however. Envision acknowledging our stress as opposed to ignoring it, talking it through with our children as an emotion to be dealt with and managed as opposed to being embarrassed of as a sign of personal weakness, and implementing healthy strategies as opposed to burying our head in the sand and hoping it will all go away soon or reaching for a beer to help us "relax". Which of the above demonstrates the capability of controlling and being in charge of our stress?

Here's an example of how what we model when our kids are younger can stay with them as they mature. When my two young children expressed an interest in helping me bake in the kitchen, I tried to patiently explain each step of the recipe, happy that they were curious about the world around them. We discussed why we were adding each ingredient, and where each ingredient was stored in the pantry. In this way, they learned that they could recreate the recipe and understood that the sugar made the concoction sweeter, the baking soda helped it to rise, the eggs made it fluffier, and the cooking spray helped it to not stick to the sides of the pan. In my kitchen, I always made sure that cleaning up the pans and utensils afterwards was as much a part of the baking experience as making sure to double-check the measurements of the ingredients before adding them to the bowl. As a result, my current teenagers still dutifully clean up the cooking area before leaving the kitchen and, unassisted, make a great batch of chocolate chip cookies. Had I not modeled those steps time and again, and discussed them out loud I doubt my children would have thought twice as they dusted off their hands and left the dirty dishes on the counter for mom to deal with. Although you're on your own for a good chocolate chip cookie recipe, later in this article I will share with you a successful "recipe" for helping our children deal with stress.

Galbraith and Delisle (1996, p.129-30) advise that in order to manage stress, we must first identify what is causing the stress, then take responsibility for it, and finally move toward taking positive action to manage it. The first part of this sounds pretty straight forward, doesn't it? After all, don't we all know the cause of our stress? Well, actually, no. Many individuals are not as "tuned in" to themselves and their feelings as others. Not all people think introspectively, master the ability to sift through their emotions, and compartmentalize their feelings to arrive at the realization of what is causing stress. In fact, when my gifted son showed signs of stress in elementary or middle school, I would ask the obligatory, "What's wrong?" He would answer, "I don't know. I'm just kind of upset." At that point, I would ask him specific questions to help him identify what was causing his anxiety. Questions like, "Are things alright with your teachers?" "Are you and your friends getting along okay?" "Did something happen here at home that made you mad?" Inevitably, his face would come alive when I asked the question that delivered the trigger. He'd then say something like, "Yeah, at recess the boys play football, but they never ask me to play." Or, "My teachers and my friends are expecting me to be in the Science Fair again this year, but I'm not really interested in doing it anymore." By modeling this process with children who are not as aware of identifying their feelings, children can learn the art of self-examination when they are feeling "unsettled."

As a teacher of the gifted, I have had great success helping students identify the stressors in their lives with the following activity adapted from a Teen Inventory designed by Schmitz and Hipp. (1995, p.47-50) Their checklist inventory focuses on five common areas: Stressors At School, Stressors With Self, Stressors With Friends, Stressors At Home, and Stressors Related To Life (for the following activity, I adapt this last prompt to read Stressors Related To Your Future). I put one heading on each of five sheets of butcher paper, give them markers, and let the students work in groups jotting down ideas for each area. The amount of information they relate never ceases to amaze me. This activity helps them identify their stressors, heightens their awareness of the various types of stress they are trying to balance, and validates the fact that even though they are "just kids" they do have legitimate issues impacting their lives.

The second suggestion from Delisle and Galbraith in helping gifted kids manage their stress is to take responsibility for it. Sal Mendaglio (2005, p.5) says, "With superior intellectual ability (gifted individuals) can pick up on details and nuances of a situation and process them very quickly." As a result, "gifted persons feel more because they see more." He goes on to explain that, "emotions are created by our interpretation of events, not by events themselves." From this perspective, it is easy to understand how a seemingly "minor" incident in one person's eyes could incite extreme ramifications to a delicate psyche in another person.

In discussing stress management, it is important that we remind students that each individual has choices about how to "interpret" potential stressors in their lives, and also how to manage their stress. Identical triggers will elicit a variety of responses from different people.

For example, scoring a B on a paper may be "no big deal" for one student, whereas it can be a traumatizing event for another. Inasmuch as any individual can control his/her responses to outside forces, it's interesting to consider Mendaglio's philosophy that "emotions are created by our interpretation of events, not by the events themselves." This perspective puts the responsibility of feeling and action squarely on the individual.

The third and final part of Delisle and Galbraith's advice is about taking positive action to successfully manage stress. In my work facilitating discussion groups with gifted middle and high school students, we have done a number of activities that I find are highly valuable in helping them understand and manage their stress. To help them become more aware of their stress level, I have them keep a daily Stress-o-Meter log (Romain & Verdick, 2000, p.16). Drawing an illustration of a thermometer, I make multiple copies and staple a personal stress log booklet for each child, with a couple of week's worth of duplicate thermometers. I have them write the day's date, and color in the "mercury" to reflect their current level of stress. Romain and Verdick have created a great example of a thermometer, which comes complete with captions that read "Cool As A Cucumber," ""Kind of Stressed", "Way Stressed", reaching all the way up to "Yikes!" After they have colored their thermometer to reflect their level of stress that particular day, we sit around, reflect, and share what is going on that is causing each of us to feel that way. As you can imagine, there is a wide range of variance among the students.

There are many valuable lessons that come from this activity. First of all, it allows every student to see that others are experiencing stress just as they are. Stress happens. Secondly, it allows every student to experience firsthand the realization that his or her stress levels vary from day to day. Sometimes, the variation is highly significant. This reassures the students that even when they're having a "Way Stressed" day, there's always hope that tomorrow will be better. Rarely do students remain stressed out at high levels for days or weeks on end. If we can help them see that high stress levels happen and that they will not necessarily be stuck at those levels forever, it makes it easier for them to weather the rough times. Thirdly, it encourages them to have healthy conversations about stress, as opposed to ignoring the feelings and emotions that inherently come with it. As an educator, keep in mind that a stress booklet like this should be used for a shorter, rather than a longer, period of time. In order for it to be positive rather than oppressive, personal stress disclosures should be restricted to reflect awareness of stress and not preoccupation with it. We want to help them positively manage stress but not become obsessive about it, lest the learning experience becomes counterproductive.

Once we have established a climate of understanding and support about the topic of stress, the next step in my discussion with students about positive ways to manage their stress is to help them get familiar with the terms "coping strategies" and "life skills" (Hipp, 1995). Hipp explains that coping strategies are short-term stress fixes that help us "get by." Life skills have more of a long-term benefit in that they help us build up resilience and help us actually manage our stress. And it's important to note that we all need to implement both short- and long-term strategies to successfully cope with the assortment of stressors in our lives.

Our discussion about coping mechanisms begins by brainstorming a list of what the students do to calm down when they get stressed. Some suggestions I've gotten from students over the years are: listen to music, hang out with friends, go for a run, play computer games, eat comfort foods, watch TV, write up a plan of what absolutely has to get done now and what can wait, go to a movie, pray for strength and guidance, read a good book, divert their attention to their hobby, try to get their parents' advice, play an instrument, IM friends, sleep, go shopping, and unfortunately, alcohol and drugs. After brainstorming the possibilities, we go back over the list they came up with and they figure out which of these genuinely help them manage and control the stressor and which ones feel good at the time but are actually aiding them in avoiding or escaping the stressor. As mentioned before, coping strategies, the short-term fixes, have a time and a place in our lives. But if we are constantly procrastinating or avoiding or escaping from our stressors as opposed to trying to manage them, we won't be taking control of our stress. Rather, our stress will be taking control of us.

Life skills are longterm character builders that boost, rather than drain, our energy. If we have a command of several healthy life skills under our belts, the way we view our lives becomes more focused on our ability to regulate any negativity that comes our way. So what are these life skills? If I asked you the question, "Over the years, what have you learned in life that has helped you to manage and control your own stress?" the lists generated would be as varied as the readers. Go ahead and grab a pencil and a piece of paper. I guarantee you will be able to list quite a few. In fact, years ago I was asked that very question by a group of students who were in a rigorous IB program at a very competitive high school. Like the quest for the Holy Grail, they too, wanted to know the secret to managing stress. After reading Hipp and Schmitz' suggestions (1995, p.30), combined with my own soul searching, this is the list that I arrived at:

- Incorporate humor wherever you can in your life. Be able to laugh at yourself.
- Get adequate sleep. The exact amount varies among individuals.
- Make time for your hobbies and passions. They recharge your batteries and make life more meaningful.
- Spend time with people who boost your energy levels rather than drain your energy levels. Try to avoid spending a lot of time with people who zap your energy. "Decluttering" is not just for kitchen drawers, it works for people too.
- Take care of your body with good nutrition and regular exercise.
- Use positive self- talk. Why should someone believe in you if you don't first believe in yourself?

- Help others. Volunteer your time to help those less fortunate or those who can benefit from your presence. Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”
- Reach out for help when you need it. Surround yourself with people who provide you with a genuine support system.
- Schedule time for relaxation. It may feel like a guilty pleasure, but your mind and body need these occasions in order to refuel.

Implement methods that help you become better organized. Whether this is accomplished with a calendar book, computer software, a PDA, a checklist, or sticky notes, organize your life so you can be more in control of it. Prioritize your list and then set out to accomplish your goals one by one. Break tasks down into manageable parts.
Allow some form of spirituality to help guide your life. Spirituality means different things to different people. Stephanie Tolan said, “Kids need to know that there’s some sense of higher power or else they feel that they are infinitely responsible for the desperation of the world.” We need to decrease burdens wherever we can.

Life skills are quite powerful. They act like a buffer against adversity in the world. To be most beneficial, life skills need to be implemented proactively, so that when stress comes your way you have an arsenal of “weapons” to defend yourself. Remember, your list of life skills might be significantly different from mine. The important thing is that you frequently incorporate whatever works best for you. Keep your list handy as a reminder of your healthy defense mechanisms, and practice them regularly.

When I discuss this topic with students, I encourage them to generate a list of life skills that works for them. I then help them to discern the difference between the short-term and the long-term fixes, and I remind them how they are both important. Depending on the amount of time available, I like to spend a few sessions focusing on various life skills in order to explore them more fully. For real-life application, it’s beneficial to go more “in depth” and investigate the real meaning and power of each one.

Finally, the activity that I have successfully used to culminate our stress unit is expanded from an idea by Romain and Verdick. (2000, p.53) I have the students make a Panic Mechanic Kit from with a shoebox, magazines, and art supplies. They decorate the outside of the box (to represent their outer bodies) with symbols/words/pictures/drawings which depict the stressors of the world that are causing external pressure on them. The inside of the box represents their inner consciousness. It is decorated with forces that they have within themselves (various coping strategies and life skills) which act upon the outside stressors to help them manage their stress. Over the years, I am constantly enlightened about the factors that are causing stress in our children. Likewise, I am continually encouraged that these students have the power and resiliency within themselves to be a positive force on negative outside forces. After arriving at this point in our discussions, the stressors in their life feel more tangible and, as a result, more manageable than ever. Although some stressors don’t have a short-term or even a long-term fix, relying on the strength of life skills can help take the “edge” off the distress.

Stress in some form or another will always be present in our lives, and it is not all negative. As a concerned parent or educator, we need to model for our children and actively teach them positive ways to think about and live with stress. Dr. Paula Cummins said, “It’s easier to build children than to repair adults.” We need to remind our students that they have many short-term and long-term choices in how they deal with stress and that there are many “right” ways to do so. Through trial and error, each of us can find out the most helpful combination of coping strategies and life skills. Stress doesn’t have to overwhelm us, for within us we each have the means to manage it.

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