



MANAGING STRESS  
TO IMPROVE LEARNING  
W o r l d E d u c a t i o n

## How Are We Doing?

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A Program/Staff Development Tool  
for Helping to Promote Mental Health in ESOL & ABE Classrooms

Lenore Balliro  
2012

### **“I’m a Teacher, Not a Therapist”**

Even the most skilled literacy and ESOL teachers in adult basic education sometimes express inadequacy, discomfort, and fear of doing the wrong thing when responding to students’ emotional issues and needs that arise in the classroom. How can practitioners in adult basic education feel more confident in this realm? How can they promote students’ mental health as part of the teaching and learning process? And why should they?

Many adult basic education students—immigrants and American born as well—have been affected by chronic stress, trauma, and adverse life conditions that can severely impede learning. Refugees bring an even more complex background, often marked by war, persecution, torture, and forced resettlement. Knowing about how these life events affect the brain, body, and learning can help us improve our practice by making conscious choices—proactively and responsively—about how to plan for and respond to our students. It doesn’t mean we should create our curriculum around these issues. It does mean that just as we become informed about literacy and language acquisition to improve our teaching, so, too can we become more informed about how trauma and chronic stress affects the brain and learning.

Though teachers are not trained as therapists, nor should they assume that role, they often serve as trusted, caring brokers for students to a new, bewildering culture. They create classrooms that mitigate isolation, display respect, and offer care. But in recent years, increased demand for measureable outcomes from funders and the labor-intensive documentation that accompanies that process leaves less time for attending to the emotional support students may need to succeed in learning. We hope this document will provide ideas for where and how teachers can put those needs back in the foreground.

### **Teachers’ Emotions**

Myrna Ann Adkins (1999) suggests, “Perhaps stress management for the teacher should be listed as a key component in helping refugees attain positive mental health,” (p.21). It is important to recognize our own emotions and respect our own boundaries as classroom teachers and staff. Students are not the only ones who get stressed or have strong emotional reactions when things happen in class. The teacher’s sense of his or her own emotions and energy can affect the way the class responds, particularly in unexpected, emotionally charged moments. Taking a minute for a self-check in (“Am I fueling this conflict? How can I calm myself so I can de-escalate things?”) and calling upon strategies that can help regulate your emotions can help keep things in balance. When intense events come up in class, for example students burst into tears or they blurt out details of horrific abuse, we naturally have strong reactions and often worry we are not doing the right thing. According to Adkins and Laura Weisel (2010), sometimes all we can do when a student is anguished, anxious, or emotionally distraught in class is to stay with the student quietly and assuredly. The physical presence of a trusted person—in this case, a teacher, can be the most helpful thing in the moment. We do not always have to “fix” things or seek action right away. Knowing this might be easier to remind ourselves we just need to be calm and present to help the moment pass.

Atkins, M. (1999). *Cultural Adjustment, Mental Health, and ESL: the Refugee Experience, the role of the Teacher, and ESL Activities*. Denver: Spring Institute

The checklist that follows is intended as a discussion tool for teachers, counselors, and administrators as they examine ways to promote mental health in the adult education program and classroom. Please see the accompanying article **Reducing Stress and Promoting Mental Health in the ABE/ESOL Classroom** by Lenore Balliro for background context for this checklist.

The checklist is organized with the following categories:

- Classroom Environment
- Class Policies and Routines
- Classroom Content
- Program Policies
- Staff Development

Classroom Environment	We do this well	We could improve by...	We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements
Is the room clean and well lit?			
Are supplies well organized?			
Does the room smell fresh? (Are there offensive odors that interfere with students' comfort?)			
Are the chairs and tables arranged to promote communication?			
Is student work or student-selected material displayed on the walls?			
Is there evidence of nature/life such as plants, a fishbowl, flowers, etc?			
Does seating allow for visibility of the doorway?			

<b>Classroom Environment</b> <i>(continued)</i>	<b>We do this well</b>	<b>We could improve by...</b>	<b>We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements</b>
Is there a space within the room (or nearby) where students can take a break, rest, be quiet for a little while?			
Are there activities available for self-soothing, such as mandalas to color? Is there music to listen to with headphones?			
Is there a basket of "fidgets" available for students to select from and use during class if needed (stress balls, wiki stix, clay bits, etc.)?			
Are fresh water and cups available in the room at all times?			
Are there simple healthy snacks available?			
Is there a bowl of peppermint hard candies or cinnamon candies available for quick sensory stimulation?			

<b>Class Policies and Routines</b>	<b>We do this well</b>	<b>We could improve by.....</b>	<b>We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements</b>
Are there clear policies for tardiness and absenteeism? Are they posted? Do students understand them?			
Are there options to engage students as they come into class before it officially begins?			
Is there a collaboratively created list of guidelines/expectations for how students behave and treat each other in class, with specific examples?			
Is this list posted at each class so it can be referred to as the class moves forward?			
Are there accountability procedures and consequences when agreed upon guidelines are not upheld?			
Are there predictable rituals / activities for starting and ending class to promote a stable and predictable environment?			
Do students know the purpose or intention for each class?			

<b>Class Policies and Routines</b> <i>(continued)</i>	<b>We do this well</b>	<b>We could improve by.....</b>	<b>We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements</b>
Are there opportunities for multiple ways of learning and displaying learning besides paper and pencil (visual art, photography, etc.)?			
Is there an on-going format for students to give regular feedback about how the class is going, what they like/don't like, what they would like to see change?			
Does the teacher use that feedback to plan classes?			
Can students take a break if they feel stressed, and then return to class?			

Classroom Content	We do this well	We could improve by...	We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements
Has the teacher helped students understand the effects of stress by integrating the topic of stress into classroom teaching?			
Has the teacher introduced stress management strategies with students and helped them practice/rehearse some of them in class on a regular basis (breathing, stretching, brain gym, etc.)?			
Is the teacher able to call upon these strategies when something difficult comes up in class?			
Does the teacher call upon stress management strategies in anticipation of a difficult event (test taking, for example)?			
Is the teacher "attuned" to the energy of the class?			
Is the teacher aware of her own boundaries and comfort level in assisting students with emotional difficulties? Can she communicate that to students in a caring way?			



Classroom Content <i>(continued)</i>	We do this well	We could improve by...	We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we can make some improvements
Is the teacher aware of her own emotions – level of comfort, calm, anxiety, etc. in response to the class or to a situation in the class?			
Does the teacher have strategies for regulating her own emotions in class as intense things come up?			
Does the teacher have a repertoire of materials and interventions that can help boost lagging energy or promote focus among students?			
Does the teacher have confidence in her ability to respond to intense emotional moments that arise in the class?			
Does the teacher have access to regular supports to help balance the intensity of teaching? Is this valued in the program?			

Program policies	We do this well	We could improve by.....	We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we <i>can</i> make some improvements
<p>Does our program have an intake process with <i>appropriate</i> and <i>legal</i> screening for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mental health issues</li> <li>• possible learning difficulties</li> <li>• availability of supports to help anticipated stressors: transportation, child care, etc</li> </ul>			
Does our program have reasonable accommodations in place for student-identified disabilities?			
Does our program have a policy, plan, or procedure to help students in emotional crisis?			
Has our program created a list of culturally appropriate community agencies with updated numbers and contacts?			
Has our program established relationships with these agencies?			
Is this list of community agencies made available to teachers when they are hired?			

<b>Program policies</b> <i>(continued)</i>	<b>We do this well</b>	<b>We could improve by.....</b>	<b>We don't do this; it seems impossible, but maybe we <i>can</i> make some improvements</b>
Does our program have a policy for students whose needs are not being met by the program and who cannot work in a group?			
Has our program established connections with culturally appropriate community social service and health/mental health agencies?			
Does our program help teachers make active use of these resources (through classroom visits, "fairs," field trips, etc.)?			
Are teachers encouraged to share this information with students and to engage students in researching their communities for appropriate services?			
Does our program have a trained counselor on staff?			
Does our counselor regularly interact with the teachers and students in a proactive way? Is this supported by the program?			
Does our program have a collection of articles, books, or suggested websites to help teachers and staff understand the connection between trauma, stress, and adverse life experiences on learning?			

Staff Development	We do this well	We could improve by	We don't do this it seems impossible, but maybe we <i>can</i> make some improvements
Does our program provide staff development opportunities around issues of mental health?			
Do we have a resource collection for teachers relating to stress reduction, mental health, and refugee backgrounds?			
Do we provide opportunities for teacher sharing and renewal?			