



MANAGING STRESS
TO IMPROVE LEARNING
World Education

Reducing Stress and Promoting Mental Health
in the ABE/ESOL Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

I'm a Teacher, Not a Therapist

How can practitioners in adult basic education classes promote mental health with their students? Many adult basic education students—immigrants and American born as well—have been affected by chronic stress, trauma, and adverse life conditions which can severely impede learning. Refugees bring an even more complex background, often marked by war, 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.

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 to 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 when students burst into tears or when 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 make it easier to remind ourselves that we just need to be calm and present to help the moment pass.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND HERE

The following ideas have been developed over the past two years in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning project at World Education in Boston, MA. Our project was informed throughout by trauma-informed practice and recent research on how the brain is affected by chronic, toxic stress.

We have tried here to include very practical, hands-on approaches to help teachers practice—proactively and responsively—creating safe and stable learning environments where students can manage their stressors and persist in their learning goals.

Categories

- Classroom Environment
- Rituals and Routines
- Classroom and Program Policies
- Classroom Content and Teaching Strategies
- Program Support
- Connecting to Community Resources
- Professional Development

You may find the document “How Are We Doing” a useful accompaniment to this piece. It provides ideas for programs as a whole to review their policies and practices in the area of mental health promotion and stress reduction.

For more background reading, please see the following: Adkins, M, et al. (1999). *Cultural Adjustment, Mental Health, and ESL*. Denver: Spring Institute
<http://www.springinstitute.org/Files/culturaladjustmentmentalhealthandesl2.pdf>

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Creating and maintaining a comfortable, organized, and calming classroom space can promote a sense of safety and stability for students. This is particularly important for refugees and others who have experienced trauma and toxic stress in their lives. It is also important to be aware of cultural norms and taboos regarding touching, gender interaction, and needs for personal space. Here are a few ideas for creating a classroom environment that can promote mental health. Even when you are teaching in a cramped space or in a room that changes from week to week, you can make small changes to improve your environment. See “Classroom in a Bag” for a fun lesson on sprucing up a dull, cramped room.

Clear Pathways

Provide clear pathways to the door and have the door visible from all seating areas. Students from war-torn countries, prisons, or violent backgrounds often need the reassurance that they can leave the room easily if they need to.

Fidgets

Provide a basket of fidgets to help students focus on learning tasks. Fidgets are small items people use to fiddle with to help them concentrate. These include, but are not limited to squeeze or squishy stress balls, small bits of plasticine clay, bendable sticks, etc. If the ABE/ESOL program has a counselor, he or she could do a short “show and tell” for teachers about fidgets and why they help students focus and concentrate, especially if they tend to be distracted and anxious at certain times. Teachers could then share this information with students and introduce them to a variety of fidgets they might want to use. The class could reflect on ways people already use certain devices or movements (chewing on a pencil, tapping a foot, snapping gum, for example) to help focus or calm themselves. A fidget bag or box could be made available in the classroom if students wanted to select one. (Note: Although a range of items is a good idea, it is probably best to stay away from fidgets that click, snap, or are so intriguing that students lose focus instead of gaining it!)



Sources for Supplies and Fidgets

- www.officeplayground.com/Stress-Relievers-C33.aspx
- www.orientaltrading.com/ (Be careful: their prices are cheap but their quality is too, so order selectively.)
- www.therapyshoppe.com/therapy/fidget-toys-8/
- www.dickblick.com

Rest Areas

Set up an area—inside or outside of the regular classroom—where students can sit out for a little while if they are feeling overwhelmed with the demands of the class or for other reasons. A rocking chair or beanbag set aside may be enough of an area. Provide self-soothing activities nearby—mandalas to color, music with earphones, and journals—to help students get past a difficult block of time without leaving class entirely, if possible.



Lighting

Make sure there is adequate light, and try to depend on natural light to reduce the need for fluorescent bulbs, which can cause eyestrain. Brainstorm other ways to provide adequate lighting for the class.

Music

Consider playing music in the background, particularly as students enter or leave the class. Soothing music can help provide easier transitions from life to school; slightly upbeat music can energize an evening class. Mix it up; ask students for suggestions. iTunes makes it very easy to create playlists with music from different countries and can be played right from a computer, if there is one in the classroom, or from another portable device. Perhaps your program can use equipment/supply funds to purchase inexpensive audio players. You may find that some students find music distracting while working, so negotiation about when, where, and how is always critical.

Water

Provide water for each class. A simple container of tap water and cups is a minimal way to ensure students are hydrated, which improves well-being and learning. Disposable cups are one option; students can also bring in a cup and put their names on them to be used over again, or the program could supply reusable water bottles as part of a lesson on health. Again, discuss with your colleagues the best way to store cups and pitchers if this is an issue. To read more about the health benefits of water, go to:

<http://nutrition.about.com/od/hydrationwater/a/waterarticle.htm>



Snacks

Consider providing healthy small snacks such as whole grain crackers or cereal bars for students, who often go a long time without eating when they rush between work, home, and school. If budget constraints are an issue, perhaps you could approach businesses in your community for donations of snacks. If you are forbidden to eat in your classroom because of computers or other policies, consider snacking in an area outside of the classroom area. You can keep a bowl of Cinna-mints and peppermints in class for drowsy students. They provide sensory stimulation and help some students focus when they are tired.

Odors

Be mindful of chemical and other strong smells that may interfere with students' comfort. Some teachers find that an aromatherapy diffuser—with natural citrus essential oil or lavender—helps create a good mood in the class.

Organization

Having organized and clearly labeled bins for supplies (paper, pencils, workbooks, etc.) helps promote predictability. The supplies don't have to be fancy, just easily identified, and accessible.

Nature

Provide evidence of nature: plants, goldfish, flowers, and plants. This helps to soften the institutional feel of most classrooms. If cost is an issue, consider approaching area businesses such as florists and pet stores. (See [Classroom in a Bag](#) lesson plan for very difficult classroom situations.)



Art

Adorn the walls with colorful, interesting prints that are changed out from time to time to add visual interest and stimulation and to prompt student engagement or simply to add aesthetic value. High quality prints can often be saved from calendars, and you can encourage students to bring in images they would like to display as well.

Having prints on the wall is a good way to promote curiosity and questioning about content, color, and design. Ask students what they would like to see in their classroom to make it a comfortable and pleasant place to learn. Then discuss how the class might make the changes.

Laughter

According to some scientific sources, laughter reduces the level of stress hormones in the body while increasing hormones that make us feel good. Laughter also stabilizes blood pressure, helps digestion, and increases oxygen supply to the muscles. As educators, we can make use of laughter as a way to relieve stress in the classroom, all while promoting community building and learning language and literacy. To read more about the health benefits of laughter, please see: <http://stress.about.com/od/stresshealth/a/laughter.htm>



<http://www.brianlukeseaward.net/articles/humor-potential.pdf>

[I Love Lucy: Laughter as Stress Release lesson plan](#)

THE VALUE OF RITUALS AND ROUTINES

Create consistent rituals to open and close class times. The beginning of each class serves an important purpose. It helps students transition from other tasks and sets a tone and atmosphere for learning. Consistent rituals or activities at the start of each class helps students settle in, relax, and get comfortable. They also promote safe, stable, and supportive classrooms. Knowing what to expect as they arrive to class can help lower students' anxiety regarding the new material they will be learning. The following list offers ideas for daily rituals. Highlighted items will bring you to more information such as lesson plans or descriptions.

- [Worry Bowls](#)
- [Check-in time](#)
- [Deep breathing or guided meditations](#)
- [Brain Gym activities](#)
- Setting intentions for class
- [Knitting](#)
- Question of the day
- [Computer/Web checks \(for updates on a particular topic\)](#)
- Vocabulary word of the day

Transparency

Be transparent with students about your intentions or goals for each particular class. (This means, of course, that you need to be clear about your own intentions!) This will help students understand your rationale for your choice of activities and materials. In addition, solicit feedback at the end of class to see if you have achieved your goals and if students were comfortable with your approach.

Movement

Establish physical routines during class to keep energy balanced. For example, use stretching, movement, and brain-gym like activities mid-way through class, or at the beginning of an evening class, to help up-regulate tired students. Use visualization and deep breathing to help calm students or to provide a transition at the end of class from school to work or home. Some teachers have admitted to feeling silly or uncomfortable when they first started doing movement in class but almost all became more comfortable as they practiced in a routine way. For the most part, students wholeheartedly welcomed the integration of some kind of movement during their class session.

Resources for Brain Gym

- www.braingym.org/
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=U44mPXEdA
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPHzEWO1vrc

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_Y0bD7i3TY

CLASSROOM AND PROGRAM POLICIES

Reviewing program policies and creating classroom guidelines near the beginning of class is a pro-active way to establish and maintain harmony in the class.

Developing Classroom Guidelines

Near the beginning of each cycle, engage students in a discussion about how they want to treat one another. Create a set of guidelines/expectations developed by the students. Try to make that list as specific as possible—that is, if they say, “Be respectful,” what does that look like? Ask for examples. Once the list is created, post it on the wall and keep it in view throughout the cycle as a reminder of what students have agreed upon. Establish consequences with students if guidelines are ignored. This helps keep students accountable and makes the list more than another piece of paper. The development of a list of guidelines can become a language learning and writing activity. Use the list as an arbiter during conflicts or disputes that can derail a class when emotions run high.

See Lisa Gimbel’s lesson plan, [Creating Ground Rules in Class](#), as an example.

Program Policies

Be transparent with students about program policies regarding absenteeism and tardiness and ensure they understand what those policies mean. Some classes create an orientation booklet for new students as a writing project. Program policies are explained by students, for students. This is an opportunity to discuss and share strategies for getting to class and getting to class on time, which can be big stressors for students.

Reminder: If you allow students the opportunity to step out of class when they feel overly stressed, anxious, or emotionally unable to continue with a particular lesson or task, it might help them to come back the next day, better observing absentee policies.

Ongoing Assessment

Integrate on-going assessment of teaching practice into your classes on a regular basis. This as a way to check in with students about the effectiveness of your teaching and of their learning preferences. It can be done by setting aside 10 minutes at the end of class with a checklist or more extensively with a journal, depending on the level of the class and the length of time you have. Try to get a sense of what they liked/didn’t like and what they would like to change. This check in varies from a content-based assessment of skills and content learning, though they overlap. By integrating the check in you are giving a message that you value students’ input.

Use Student Feedback

Use the feedback you get from students to plan your future classes. Teaching and learning is always a negotiation between student and teacher. Be mindful of students' comfort level with new teaching approaches, but don't be afraid to try something a little beyond their comfort level once you have established trust and safety in the class.

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES PART 1

The topic of stress, and how it affects the brain and learning, is a rich area for classroom instruction and a good opportunity for what therapists call “psycho-education.” By sharing information about how the brain is affected by stress, trauma, and persistent adverse life conditions, students can become more reflective about their own experiences and recognize that they are not alone in their learning challenges.

Exploring ways students can help themselves to cope with chronic stress in a healthy manner brings a positive focus to the topic. Discuss strategies students already use to promote mental health and broaden the scope in class. Explore cross-cultural differences about what “stress” means—sometimes there is no word for this in other languages, so a variety of vocabulary about emotions can describe feelings: worries, burdens, etc. Provide students with mind/body resources to see which ones they might choose to explore.

Choices

Always create choices for students in assignments. Some topics that seem very mild to us may trigger traumatic memories for students. Myrna Anne Adkins of the Spring Institute in Colorado suggests that teachers ask students to describe a “favorite place” rather than to describe their childhood home. They may pick their childhood home, but they don't have to if it will be too painful. Consider applying this concept of choice whenever possible so students are in control of what and how much they want to reveal in a class lesson.

Stress as a Content Area

The topic of stress and the brain can be integrated into ABE or GED classes (science, reading in the content areas); in ESOL at any level (health, the body, family); and in writing and reading classes. Check out the links below for source material.

Investigating Student Stressors

How can you find out about students' stressors? Check out the following lesson plans and tools, most of which were created by teachers in the Managing Stress project, to help get you started:

- [Template for stress tree](#)
- [Locating Stress in the body](#)
- [Examples of students' stress trees](#)

- **Assessing Levels of Stress**

Integrating Stress Management into Classroom Practice

Integrate stress management strategies as part of classroom routines, particularly in anticipation of stressful events like tests. Check out the following lesson plans teachers in the project have created to help students manage their stress and anxieties in class:

- **Letting Go Lesson Plan**
- **Guided Meditation Lesson plan**
- **Checking In and Letting Go Daily Ritual**
- **Breathing and Balancing: Yoga in the Classroom**
- <http://nelrc.org/managingstress/program%20notes%2002%20-%20july%2028.pdf>

You may also want to review the benefits of Brain Gym. To read what one teacher and her students had to say about Brain Gym as a way to relax and focus, read Sally Daniel's [reflection](#). Or check out the following Brain Gym resources:

- Brain Gym International: <http://www.braingym.org/>
- Brain Gym YouTube Videos
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U44mPXEBdA>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPHzEWO1vrc>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_Y0bD7i3TY

The following are good resources for guiding teachers and students in mind body practices suitable for the classroom:

- Butler-Ross, N. & Sulb, M. (2001). *Meditation Express: Stress Relief in 60 Seconds Flat*. Lincolnwood, IL: Contemporary Books.
- Gardiner, P. (2010). *Yoga at the Kitchen Sink: Standing & Chair Yoga Poses for Seniors & Their Friends*. Arlington: MA: self published.
- www.yogaandseniors.com/sample
- Murphy, J. (2008). *Move the Body, Stretch the Mind: Open Yourself to Learning through Breathwork, Movement and Meditation*. Edmonton, AB: Windsound Learning Society.
- Rowe, K.P. (2007). *A Settled Mind: Stress Reduction for the Classroom and Beyond*. Raymond, ME: Five Seeds.

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES PART 2

Creating a classroom environment that promotes mental health means attending to well-being and joy. Engaging in expressive arts as a way to learn and to display learning can bring students together in vital and authentic ways. Drawing from multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2) allows students to explore how they learn best and may afford relief for students who have not had success with text based, linear approaches. Sensory activities (using clay or painting, for example) can be soothing and self-regulating for the highly anxious student. Collectively creating artifacts (knitting, murals, quilts, etc) can bring students together in non-verbal and powerful ways, helping to combat isolation and allowing for students with various skills to shine in certain areas. The classroom environment does not have to be limited to the four walls in a building. Getting out for walks allows for fresh air, sunshine, and movement, and can be turned into language, research, and writing activities. Holding class in a coffee shop can break down barriers associated with past institutional failures.

The following list gives examples of some expressive arts activities that teachers in the Managing Stress to Improve Learning project have implemented. Highlighted items provide links to lesson plans and descriptions of expressive activity projects

- [Affirmation boxes](#)
- [Altered shoes projects](#)
- [Mandalas \(3-D and paper\)](#)
- [Anti-stress bags for families](#)
- Visual journals
- [Wooden puzzle project](#)
- [Playback Theater](#)
- Knitting and crocheting group
- [Stress Trees](#)
- [Poetry writing](#)
- [Songbook for Singing, Spreading Joy and Laughter, and Learning English](#)



PROGRAM SUPPORT

Teachers need to be supported by clearly established and communicated program policies so they are not left alone to respond to difficult situations in class.

Program Intake

A thorough and sensitive intake process combines appropriate and legal screenings for mental health issues and possible learning difficulties. It also can screen for issues that might interfere with the students' ability to attend class regularly (childcare and transportation issues, for example) and provide an opportunity to suggest supports in those areas for students. Students can voluntarily disclose learning difficulties or other challenges.

Accommodations

Publicly funded adult education programs are mandated to provide "reasonable accommodations" for students who have identified challenges that interfere with their learning. Exploring among staff what reasonable accommodations means can help teachers evaluate what to do when students present ongoing challenges to the classroom environment, such as interfering with others' learning, etc.

The Support of a Trained Counselor

Having a trained counselor on staff with experience and background in psycho-social issues as well as academic counseling can benefit the program greatly. The counselor can work with teachers in a number of ways: by leading discussion sessions about mental health/behavioral issues, especially the effects of trauma and stress on learning; by providing resources for teachers to read or watch; by suggesting strategies to help students focus in class or persist in reaching their goals; by leading student group sessions during and/or after classroom times on topics dealing with stress management, wellness, and other issues defined by students; by linking with community service providers described below; and by supporting students to start student led support groups.

CONNECTING TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Establishing relationships with culturally appropriate social service and mental health agencies in the community, and keeping those relationships vital and alive, can strengthen a program in a number of ways. Health workers can visit classes to discuss student health issues and concerns. Teachers can prepare for a visit by having students create a list of questions to ask the visitor. This can be designed as a literacy and language lesson as well as a way to ensure that students' interests are being addressed. Afterwards, the teacher can create reading and language lessons based on the answers given by the visitor. The community health center may welcome a chance to participate in a program health fair for students at the program. By getting to know the staff at nearby agencies, students may be more comfortable visiting there. Teachers may also want to have a class visit a neighborhood health center. Map reading skills, giving and receiving directions, and other language skills can be practiced for ESOL classes.

To read about how teachers helped their students connect to community resources, click the links below.

- **Community Resources: Making Them Real to Students, Lisa Gimbel**
- **Mental Health and Community Resources lesson, Jeri Bayer**
- **Getting Connected to Community Resources, Alice Nelson**

Making a Directory

Creating a list of nearby social service agencies (food banks, housing agencies, mental health services, health care, and other agencies that may provide resources to student-identified areas of concern) with updated phone, web, and contact names, can help students locate services they need. This can turn into a class research project, updated every year. Students can notate the list with their own experiences or advice to other students. Students can also add resources the teacher may not know about.

The following organizations can provide useful resources on mental health issues:

- NAMI – National Alliance for Mental Illness: www.nami.org/
- SAMSHA – Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration: www.samhsa.gov/
- Mental Health First Aid: <http://sr-ahec.org/professionals/pdf/September2011.pdf?gclid=CPDWj8-awKsCFUqK4Aodx2UUrQ>

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned earlier, teachers are not counselors, though they are in a unique position to offer support to students who come to trust them. Staff development for teachers, preferably on-site and specific to the population of the adult education program, can help teachers learn about the effects of trauma, chronic stress, and adverse life conditions on the brain and body, on learning and retention, and on student behaviors. Developing knowledge and experience in these areas can strengthen teaching and learning. Mini workshops, online webinars, teacher sharing, conference participation, and reading groups are all possibilities. Prevailing practices in teacher training suggests paid stipends and release time for teachers to engage in staff and program development.

Teachers in adult basic education work in multi-cultural settings. Often their students arrive from war torn countries after living in refugee camps. They may be torture victims. They may have experienced persecution. Programs can support teachers by helping build their background knowledge about the populations they teach. This doesn't mean they should create curriculum units on a particular war or on torture! It does mean that teachers can enlighten themselves about the politics, religious practices, first languages, and social customs of their students so they can become more sensitive teachers. Please check the following links for

materials about refugees and immigrants as a place to start. In addition to this website, www.nelrc.org/managingstress, check out the following sources for useful information:

- **ORR - Office for Refugee Resettlement**

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/>

- **CAL - Center for Applied Linguistics**

You can browse by culture to get information on a wide variety of countries and you can get materials in many, many languages of refugees in the U.S

<http://www.cal.org/co/lessonplans/> and <http://www.cal.org/co/publications/welcome.html>

- **ProfessionalStudiesAE Online Professional Development for Adult Educators**

<http://professionalstudiesae.worlded.org/index.html>