### Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

**Agenda**

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Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

Hans Selye

Definition
- A term coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye
- “The non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.”

Implications
- Life is filled with change and adaptation
- Stress is universal and experienced by everyone
- Stress is physical; however, reactions are unique
- Awareness of personal reactions is essential
- Identifying sources of change and resulting stress can be helpful

Source: Hyde & Forsyth, 2008
### Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distress</th>
<th>Eustress</th>
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<tr>
<td>Caused by negative situations</td>
<td>Caused by positive situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Underachievement</td>
<td>- All A’s; high grades/scores</td>
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<td>- Multiple passions</td>
<td>- Top prizes</td>
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<td>- World events</td>
<td>- First class performer</td>
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<td>- External pressures</td>
<td>- Attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Internal pressures</td>
<td>- Highly creative, innovative</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Illness/injury</td>
<td>- Social competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Intensity/sensitivity/perfectionism</td>
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</table>
Anxiety

- Non-specific sense of apprehension, worry, foreboding, angst, unease that something awful will happen
- Unidentified stress or source
- Same physical symptoms as stress; stress reaction is hyper-active and is not turned off
- Range of feelings from disquietude to terror
- 13 of 100 in the nine to seventeen age group have anxiety disorder

Source: Hyde & Forsyth, 2008
The Bad News

- You can't cure stress by thinking or worrying about it.
- Being bright, talented, creative, motivated, smart, ambitious, and even good looking can add to the stress in your life.
- Academic success and drive aren't enough to make life manageable. The world is too complicated and intense, and it's changing too fast.
- There are no easy answers, simple solutions, or quick fixes for managing stress.
- Only a handful of families and schools teach the life skills you need to successfully deal with stress.
- Too much stress can lead to significant reactions; can be psychological/emotional/physical.

Source: Hipp, 1985; Fiedler & Kane, 2007
# Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

## The Good News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You <em>can</em> learn to understand why your life gets oppressive, depressive, stressed or otherwise unhealthy.</th>
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<tr>
<td>You <em>can</em> learn to live in a new and better way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>You <em>can</em> feel more in charge of your world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding signature strengths can build resilience.</td>
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<td>Protective factors can enhance well-being.</td>
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<th>Even a small change in your lifestyle can make a big difference.</th>
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<td>Kids can learn the signals from their body and make adjustments accordingly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of individual needs/routines for food, exercise and sleep provide more stability.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social supports (teachers/friends/family) may provide refuge.</td>
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Source: Hipp, 1985; Fiedler & Kane, 2007
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</table>
SPICES: Facets of the Self

**Social** relates to interpersonal connections (to others and to community)

**Intellectual** relates to cognitive abilities

**Emotional** relates to intrapersonal connections; affect

**Physical** relates to physical being; the body

**Creative** relates to imagination

**Spiritual** relates to meaning and purpose

Source: Fiedler (nd)
Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

Signs Of Stress Overload
Physical Reactions to Stress
- Autonomic nervous system (don’t think)
  - Sympathetic nervous (fight-or-flight)
  - Parasympathetic nervous (rest-digest)

Physical Signs of Stress
- Heart rate increases
- Respiration increases
- Blood pressure increases
- Perspiration increases
- Acuity of senses
- Adrenal glands secrete cortisol

Source: Hyde & Forsyth, 2008
Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

**Signs Of Stress Overload- Physical**

- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite
- Chronic fatigue
- Vague stomach upset
- Low grade infection
- Rashes
- Frequent colds
- Headaches

Source: Youngs, 1986
Signs Of Stress Overload - Emotional

- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Panic
- Inappropriate laughter
- Feelings of failure
- Feelings of unworthiness

Source: Youngs, 1986
Signs Of Stress Overload - Behavioral

- Fighting
- Stealing
- Refusing to do school work
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Yelling/significant & frequent tantrums
- Running away from school or truancy
- Attention-seeking behaviors (significant)
- Arson

Source: Youngs, 1986
Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

Signs Of Stress Overload - Spiritual

- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Confusion about feeling connected to self and others
- Feeling rudderless; without a moral compass
- Loss of compassionate nature
- No sense of belonging
- Abandonment of spiritual practices (meditation, visualization, prayer, mantra)

Kane, 2010
Stress Overload Can Lead to:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Phobias
- Panic Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
- Depression

When stress interferes with daily life and self-management is not enough, then calling a mental health professional is essential.
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The stress profile of each gifted child is affected by:

- Asynchrony of developmental tasks in each area
- Birth order in the family
- Gender
- Family constellation (including extended family)
- Cultural, linguistic, economic background
- Temperament (introversion/extraversion; range of intensity/sensitivity; optimism/pessimism)
- Overexcitabilities (Dabrowski)
- Unique combination of cognitive/affective characteristics of giftedness
Differentiating Characteristics of Gifted Children

- **Unusual emotional depth and intensity**
  - need to have philosophical discussions; guidance

- **Idealism and sense of justice, which appear at an early age**
  - need to transcend negative reactions by finding values to which he/she can be committed

- **Advance level of moral judgment**
  - need to receive validation for nonaverage morality

- **Strongly motivated by self-actualization needs**
  - Need to be given opportunities to follow divergent paths and pursue strong interests

(Source: Clark, 2008)
General Sources Of Anxiety (No Control)

- Terrorism
- Natural disasters (hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis)
- Exposure to violence (media; personally)
- Exposure to drugs/alcohol/risky behaviors
- Death; loss of loved one including pets
- Bullying (including cyberbullying)
- Discrimination (race, gender, sexual orientation)
- Changing family circumstances (divorce, moving, financial)
- Loss of romantic relationship (real or imagined)
- Relationships with friends/peers

Source: Stress 101
Situational Stress of Gifted People

- conflict between our values and the values of others (what is and what ought to be)
- interpersonal disharmony
- lack of intellectual stimulation or challenge
- challenges beyond our capability to respond
- threats to emotional or physical well-being
- lack of resources to accomplish a task
- time constraints
- difficulty choosing from equally attractive options

Source: Fiedler, 2007
Self-imposed Stress of Gifted People

- setting excessively high standards for ourselves
- fear of failure, fear of success
- negative self-talk; self-criticism
- emotionally loaded/highly evaluative beliefs about ourselves and our environment
- believing that everyone should love, respect, and praise us
- buying into others' negative evaluations of us
- catastrophizing
- worrying

Source: Fiedler, 2007
Existential Stress of Gifted People

- global concerns (e.g., nuclear disaster, war, poverty, world hunger, the environment, etc.)
- idealism
- anger at fate
- isolation
- need for meaning and purpose

Source: Fiedler, 2007
## Sources of Stress for Gifted People

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Source: Fiedler, 2007
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Basic Tools for Stress Management

- Remember the “basics" (Maslow's basic needs) - H.A.L.T.
- More basics: Nutrition, Exercise, Sleep (don’t forget!)
- Identify what's what:
  - what stresses you out,
  - when enough is enough for you, and
  - what works for you!
- Make contact - the “talking cure“ or the “writing cure” or the “texting cure”
- Books can help—for you and your kids

Source: Fiedler, 2007
Basic Tools for Stress Management

- *Your* rights are *all right* - learn how to assert yourself appropriately
- Your “sacred circle" - supportive relationships (for you and your child)
- Progress is progressive - one step at a time! “Inch by inch is a cinch; yard by yard is too darn hard!”
- Humor helps
- Who's in charge here? Saying “no“—Parenting classes?
- Know when to ask for help; vulnerability is OK

Source: Fiedler, 2007
Practical Tips to Help Gifted Kids With Stress

**Interpersonal**

- Explore topics, where appropriate, that create cause for concern (e.g., what do you think about the destruction of the rain forests? In what ways could our family eliminate hunger?)
- Limit exposure to unsettling images/sounds from media sources and computer games
- Role play or use “social stories” to rehearse how to deal with uncomfortable social situations
- Provide situations for connecting with intellectual peers or mentor
- Share information on personality type (introversion vs. extraversion and implications for social situations)
Practical Tips to Help Gifted Kids With Stress

*Intrapersonal*

- Provide specific techniques for conflict resolution and teach appropriate assertiveness
- Elicit suggestions from kids on how to use time more efficiently
- Demonstrate decision-making strategies (how does the family select a movie?)
- Use journals to help kids sort out their feelings, fears, joys and frustrations
- Help kids set goals by week, unit or semester – evaluate both the goals and goal-setting process.; modify goals with the kids when their goals aren't achieved
Practical Tips to Help Gifted Kids With Stress

**Intrapersonal**
- Teach creative problem solving strategies and apply to personal situation
- Hold family meetings regularly
- Model creative, risk-taking behaviors; encourage “courageous conversations” so kids can speak their truth and others can witness
- Probe personal beliefs and concerns; help kids identify issues/stressors

**Interpersonal**
- Have family try something that no one has done and allow to observe how adults deal with mistakes
- Provide opportunities for different circles of friends
Practical Tips to Help Gifted Kids With Stress

- Provide opportunities for students to learn more about world events and the process of change
- Explore service learning projects so there are outlets for caring; model compassion as family
- Teach kids how to search for careers that address deep concerns
- Bring gifted students together to develop relationships with older, younger, or online peers
- Use bibliotherapy and cinematherapy to provide an “arms-length” approach for delving into topics
- Connect kids to mentors who share similar concerns and passions
- Encourage/discuss spiritual leaders via biographies/film
- Explore activities such as Peace Jam/Future Problem Solving
# Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

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## Contemplative Practices

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<th>What?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quiet the mind, focus attention, adopt a receptive attitude</td>
<td>Gifted kids dwell on things that create internal dissonance (e.g. global issues, natural disasters)</td>
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<td>Relaxation Response</td>
<td>Existential angst appears earlier in the developmental process for many gifted kids</td>
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<td>Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation</td>
<td>Executive functions of the brain (planning, organizing, self-regulation) may lag behind cognitive development; education/training helps</td>
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<td>Chanting; music (60bpm)</td>
<td>Intensity and sensitivity may create significant emotional turmoil for gifted kids</td>
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<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Profiles of gifted children should be matched appropriately to the practice; find the ones that work</td>
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<td>▪ concentration</td>
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<td>▪ loving-kindness</td>
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<td>▪ mindfulness</td>
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<td>▪ guided visualization</td>
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Contemplative Practices

- Mind-body connecting; walk the labyrinth
- Visualization
- Practice imagery/fantasy
- Tai-chi; Yoga; Brain Gym
- Bibliotherapy, cinematherapy
- Journaling
- Experiences in nature
- Time with pet
- Artistic practices (calligraphy, mandalas)
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How Nature and Play Helps Kids Reduce Stress

- Research links mental, physical, and spiritual health to connection with nature
- Effective stress reduction is apparent after experiences in nature
- Deeper sensory awareness and sense of interrelatedness of beings emerges with environmental education
- Nature provides healing/respite for those children in unhealthy life situations

“The ability to play is critical not only to being happy but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.” Stuart Brown

Sources: Louv, 2005; Kane & Fiedler, 2006
Stress & Anxiety: Helping Gifted Kids Cope

How Nature and Play Helps Kids Reduce Stress

- Stimulates powers of observation and enhances perceptive abilities
- Fosters creativity including construction of forts, shelter, tree houses (a sense of place)
- Instills a sense of peace and a deeper connection to the Universe
- Inspires creative endeavors such as poetry, art, storytelling, and drama
- Opportunities for problem-solving, team-building, healthy risk-taking
- Provides opportunities for positive experiences that are self-generated and without any or little expense
- Play enables individuals to live a good life

Sources: Louv, 2005; Kane & Fiedler, 2006
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## Helping Kids Develop Self-Advocacy

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
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| Be Responsible            | - For Your Behavior  
                           | - For Your Feelings                                  |
| Make Choices              | - Expectations                                       |
| Get to Know Yourself      | - Name Your Feelings  
                           | - Talk About Your Feelings                           |
|                           | - Dealing With Strong Feelings                      |
| Get and Use Power         | - Personal Power                                     |
|                           | - Role Power                                         |

Source: Fiedler & Kane, 2007
Communication Tips for Self-Advocacy

- Use “I” statements for effective communication
- Teach tools of active listening
- Role play difficult conversations
- Help children distinguish between assertive and aggressive communication styles
- Provide examples of cynical or negative styles of communication and the effects on listeners
- Demonstrate effective nonverbal communication
- Help kids practice self-advocacy (start small); be available for support
- Collect examples of children who are able to get others to listen
From Positive Psychology: Elements of Well-Being Theory

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Measureable Elements</th>
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<td>Contribute to well-being</td>
<td>Positive emotion (includes happiness)</td>
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<td>Pursue for own sake</td>
<td>Engagement (flow)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defined and independent of other elements</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
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<td>Relationships</td>
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<td>Achievement</td>
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Source: Seligman, 2011
positive education: teaching well-being to young people

strategies include:

- gratitude and appreciation
- nurturing relationships (how-to)
- resilience
- identifying and building on strengths
- creating meaning
- optimism

source: seligman, 2011
“Don't underestimate the value of Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering.”

~Pooh's Little Instruction Book, inspired by A.A. Milne
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Fiedler, E., & Kane, M. (2007, November). *Stress management and the gifted: Coping with everyday life*. Presentation at the 53rd Annual Convention of the National Association for Gifted Children, Minneapolis, MN.


Kane, M., & Fiedler, E. (2006, November). *Wisdom in nature*. Poster session at the 53nd Annual Convention of the National Association for Gifted Children, Charlotte, NC.

References (cont.)


Do You Have Any Questions?