

The **STRESS**METER



The STRESSOMETER

From Let's THINK About Feelings, Emotions, and Stress

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Cognitive behavioral therapy “helps a person focus on his or her current problems and how to solve them. ... The therapist helps the patient learn how to identify distorted or unhelpful thinking patterns, recognize and change inaccurate beliefs, relate to others in more positive ways, and change behaviors accordingly.”

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies>

This resource provides child-friendly “tools” for mental health professionals who already have expertise in cognitive-behavioral therapy. This resource is not intended to provide detailed training in CBT. This resource provides activities and visual tools that make CBT concepts more accessible for children as well as their parents and teachers.

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THE STRESSOMETER

Rationale:

Stress is a natural part of life and some stress can actually be good for us—it's called **healthy stress**. However, too many stressors and/or too few effective strategies for coping with stress results in **unhealthy stress**. It is helpful for children to be able to accurately identify not only the sources of stress (the stressors) in their lives but also to be able to measure their personal stress level, assessing where they fall on the healthy-unhealthy stress continuum.

Application/Treatment modality: This activity is an assessment tool for individual work with a child.

Goals:

- With this activity children:
- learn the difference between healthy and unhealthy stress.
 - use the **Stressometer** as a tool to assess the impact of stress on their lives.
 - learn about the role of CB interventions in helping them deal with stress.

Materials Needed:

1. *Stress Can Be Good - Sometimes!*
2. *The Stressometer*
3. Blank *Here's What Happened* cards (optional)
4. Top 4 Stress-Busters



1. Begin with a discussion of **healthy** and **unhealthy** stress. Use page 31: *Stress Can Be Good - Sometimes!*

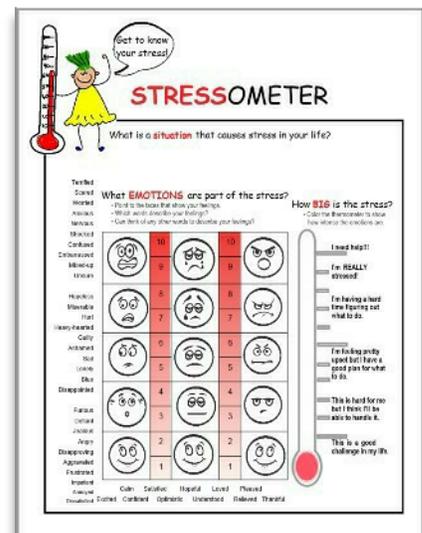
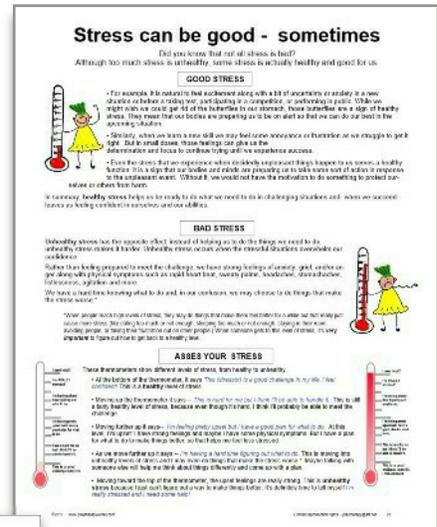
2. Help the child to identify a number of stressors in his or her. Try to include examples of both healthy and unhealthy stress. (Optional: write them on blank *Here's What Happened* cards.)

3. Introduce *The Stressometer* and ask the child to choose *one* of the stressors to talk about. (It might be a good idea to begin with healthy stress before tackling the more challenging situations.) The Stressometer has two parts:

Part 1: the feelings chart, used to explore the child's emotional response to a specific stressor.

Part 2: the stress thermometer, used to assess how well the child is coping with that stressor, and whether they are experiencing **healthy** or **unhealthy** stress (or somewhere in between).

(Full instructions for the Stressometer are on next page.)



The Stressometer Instructions - Continued

Part 1: The Feelings Chart

Introduction: The feelings chart (pictured at right) has 3 columns showing escalating levels of stress (from 1 to 10) in three categories emotions. The bottom of each column shows a face that portrays a feeling such as calm/confident/satisfied. Moving up each column, the face portray increasing worry (1st column), sadness (2nd column) or anger (3rd column).

Explain to the child that when stressful things happen, we may have “mixed emotions.”



Using the feelings chart, have the child identify any emotions associated with the selected stressor. Circle the faces and also encourage the child to also identify words that correspond to the feeling. Underline the word on the chart or add words if the child names an emotion not on the chart.

Take time with this (especially as you move on to the more challenging situations), allowing the child to fully explore their emotions, which are likely to be mixed. The same stressor may cause varying types and levels of emotions at different times, depending on a variety of factors, including the support and coping strategies that are available. For example, if a child selects the situation “My parents fight and yell at one another,” the child may feel *worried* on some occasions, but *angry* on others. The child may feel *sad* every time their parents fight, but also feel *relieved* and *loved* when a older sibling is there to provide comfort.

Analyzing the emotions with this level of detail, and including information about healthy coping strategies and support, will provide valuable information needed for the next step.

Terrible Scared Worried Miserable Hurt Angry

What EMOTIONS are part of the stress?

- Which faces show your feelings?
- Which words describe your feelings?
- Can think of any other words to describe your feelings?

Confused	10	10	10
Embarrassed	9	9	9
Mixed-up	8	8	8
Unsure	7	7	7
Hopeless	6	6	6
Miserable	5	5	5
Hurt	4	4	4
Heavy-hearted	3	3	3
Guilty	2	2	2
Ashamed	1	1	1
Sad			
Lonely			
Blue			
Disappointed			
Furious			
Defiant			
Jealous			
Angry			
Disapproving			
Aggravated			
Frustrated			
Impatient			
Annoyed			
Dissatisfied			
	Calm Satisfied Hopeful Loved Pleased		
	Excited Confident Optimistic Understood Thankful		

Part 2: The Stress Thermometer

How **BIG** is the stress?
Use the thermometer to show how intense the emotions are.



Introduction: The stress thermometer is used to indicate how well a person is coping with a particular stressor. The sentences alongside the thermometer represent things people might say to themselves about how difficult it is to cope with the stress. For example, the bottom of thermometer reads *This is a good stress in my life*. This corresponds with the faces at the lower level of the feelings chart. The sentence and the face show that, even though something is stressful, the person feels confident that they can cope with it. Moving up the thermometer, the sentences and faces show increasing difficulty in coping with the stress.



Using the stress thermometer, help the child assess his or her stress level (with regard to that particular stressor) and determine whether the stress that they are experiencing is healthy stress, unhealthy stress, or somewhere in between.

As you discuss the various levels of stress with the child, you can gather additional information about the coping strategies (including accessing support) that they have been using.

Thank the child for their hard work. If they have revealed significant stress, remind them that your role is to help them find a plan to keep their stress at a healthy level.

Follow up: Let the child know that the purpose of this assessment assessment process is to lay a foundation for therapeutic interventions designed to:

- eliminate or transform some of the stressors in the child's life;
- support the development of healthy methods of coping with stress.

The next tool, **Top 4 Stress Busters** can be used to explain to children what they will be learning in future CB sessions.

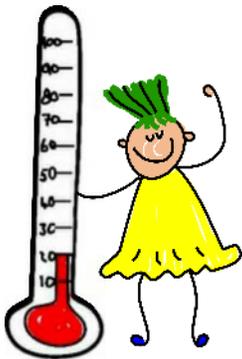


Stress can be good - sometimes

Did you know that not all stress is bad?

Although too much stress is unhealthy, some stress is actually healthy and good for us.

GOOD STRESS



- For example, it is natural to feel excitement along with a bit of uncertainty or anxiety in a new situation or before a taking test, participating in a competition, or performing in public. While we might wish we could get rid of the butterflies in our stomach, those butterflies are a sign of healthy stress. They mean that our bodies are preparing us to be on alert so that we can do our best in the upcoming situation.
- Similarly, when we learn a new skill we may feel some annoyance or frustration as we struggle to get it right. But in small doses, those feelings can give us the determination and focus to continue trying until we experience success.
- Even the stress that we experience when decidedly unpleasant things happen to us serves a healthy function: it is a sign that our bodies and minds are preparing us to take some sort of action in response to the unpleasant event. Without it, we would not have the motivation to do something to protect ourselves or others from harm.

In summary, **healthy stress** helps us be ready to do what we need to do in challenging situations and--when we succeed--leaves us feeling confident in ourselves and our abilities.

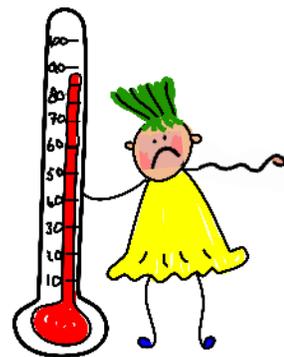
BAD STRESS

Unhealthy stress has the opposite effect: instead of helping us to do the things we need to do, unhealthy stress makes it harder. Unhealthy stress occurs when the stressful situations overwhelm our confidence.

Rather than feeling prepared to meet the challenge, we have strong feelings of anxiety, grief, and/or anger along with physical symptoms such as rapid heart beat, sweaty palms, headaches, stomachaches, listlessness, agitation and more.

We have a hard time knowing what to do and, in our confusion, we may choose to do things that make the stress worse.*

*When people reach high levels of stress, they may do things that make them feel better for a while but that really just cause more stress (like eating too much or not enough, sleeping too much or not enough, staying in their room, avoiding people, or taking their frustration out on other people.) When someone gets to this level of stress, it's **very important** to figure out how to get back to a healthy level.

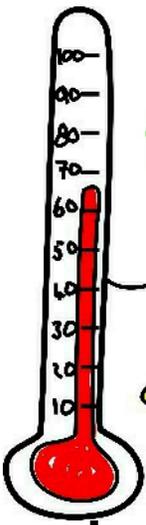


ASSESS YOUR STRESS

These thermometers show different levels of stress, from healthy to unhealthy.

- At the bottom of the thermometer, it says *This (stressor) is a good challenge in my life. I feel confident!* This is a **healthy** level of stress.
- Moving up the thermometer it says -- *This is hard for me but I think I'll be able to handle it.* This is still a fairly healthy level of stress, because even though it's hard, I think I'll probably be able to meet the challenge.
- Moving further up it says-- *I'm feeling pretty upset but I have a good plan for what to do.* At this level, I'm upset: I have strong feelings and maybe I have some physical symptoms. But I have a plan for what to do to make things better, so that helps me feel less stressed.
- As we move further up it says -- *I'm having a hard time figuring out what to do.* This is moving into unhealthy levels of stress and I may even do things that make the stress worse.* Maybe talking with someone else will help me think about things differently and come up with a plan.
- Moving toward the top of the thermometer, the upset feelings are really strong. This is **unhealthy stress** because I just can't figure out a way to make things better. It's definitely time to tell myself *I'm really stressed and I need some help!*





Get to know your stress!

The **STRESSOMETER**

What is a **situation** that causes stress in your life?

- Terrified
- Scared
- Worried
- Anxious
- Nervous
- Shocked
- Confused
- Embarrassed
- Mixed-up
- Unsure
- Hopeless
- Miserable
- Hurt
- Heavy-hearted
- Guilty
- Ashamed
- Sad
- Lonely
- Blue
- Disappointed
- Furious
- Defiant
- Jealous
- Angry
- Disapproving
- Aggravated
- Frustrated
- Impatient
- Annoyed
- Dissatisfied

What **EMOTIONS** are part of the stress?

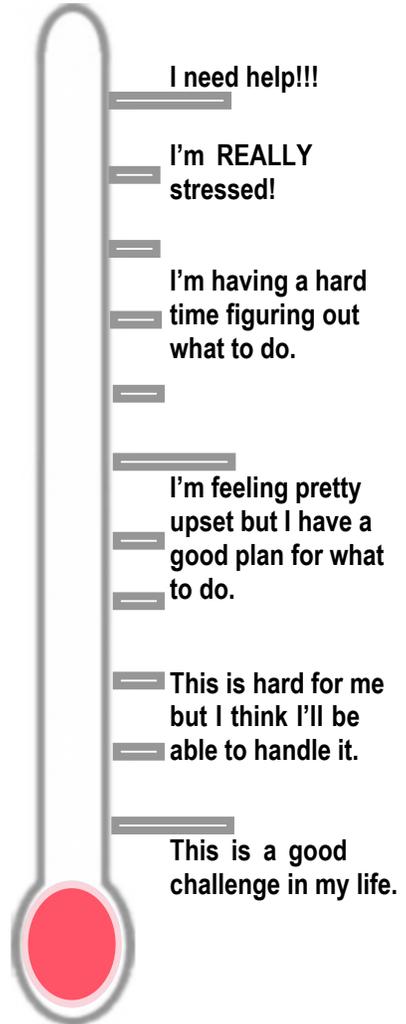
- Which faces show your feelings?
- Which words describe your feelings?
- Can think of any other words to describe your feelings?

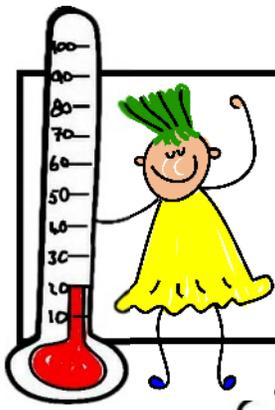
How **BIG** is the stress?

- Use the thermometer to show how intense the emotions are.

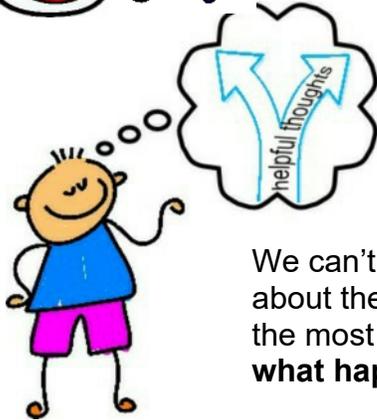
	10		10	
	9		9	
	8		8	
	7		7	
	6		6	
	5		5	
	4		4	
	3		3	
	2		2	
	1		1	

Calm Satisfied Hopeful Loved Pleased
Excited Confident Optimistic Understood Thankful





Top 4 Stress-Busters



1. CHOOSE the best way of thinking.

Earlier (when you had to think like a detective) you had to leave out your opinions, beliefs or guesses. Good news—now is the time to talk about them!

We can't change the facts (what happens to us) but we CAN change the way we think about the facts (our opinions, beliefs and guesses). Sometimes our first thoughts aren't the most helpful ones. **Choosing the best, most helpful way of thinking about what happens is the #1 stress buster!**

2. STOP doing things that aren't helpful.

After you have some helpful ways of thinking, you also have to remember to STOP thinking and doing things that **aren't** helpful. That can be tricky, because we often just react automatically when upsetting things happen.

But don't give up. If you make a mistake, just notice what you have done (and apologize if you've done something wrong) and then switch back to your new and helpful way of thinking.



3. CALM your body.

When a cat is upset because it sees a barking dog, its body reacts: it tenses its muscles and arches its body. Its breathing changes and it hisses. It's ready to run away or even to fight! But when it feels safe, it relaxes its body, breathes normally and purrs.

Our bodies react when we feel upset and sometimes it's hard to calm down. Learning how to relax your body is a very good way of dealing with stress. Even if nothing else changes, having a relaxed body will help you think more clearly and just feel better.



4. Make a good PLAN.

Whatever has happened that upset you, you will feel better if you have a plan so you'll know what to do if it happens again.

And the best way to make a plan is to have someone help you.

Two heads are better than one to come up with ideas, plus the other person can help you remember to follow the plan. And if the first plan you make doesn't quite work the way you hoped, you can talk to your helper and try again.



For the work that you do with children!

Cartoon people drawings by Prawny

We'd love to hear from you:

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Please contact us at
playtherapy@att.net

About the Authors



Daniel Yeager is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a Registered Play Therapist and Play Therapist-Supervisor. His interest and experience in the areas of child and adolescent development have led him to become an active proponent of both play therapy and mental health education for families. Daniel presents training nation-wide for professionals on topics related to cognitive behavioral therapy, an also ADHD and executive function .



Marcie Fields Yeager is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a Registered Play Therapist and Play Therapist-Supervisor. She has extensive experience in providing play therapy for young children adjusting to situational stress and trauma. She has also designed programs for teaching children communication and problem-solving skills through the use of literature, creative drama and games. Her first therapeutic game was the winner of the Childsworld/Childsplay **Games to Help People** contest. She also created **Courageous Kids and Hurricane Heroes**, a packet of information and activities that was used in schools to help children adjust to changes in their lives brought about by Hurricane Katrina

The Yeagers are the authors of ***Executive Function and Child Development*** (2013, W.W. Norton) and of a chapter in ***The Therapeutic Powers of Play: Twenty Core Agents of Change*** (2013, John Wiley & Sons, 2nd ed.) In 2007, the Yeagers jointly received the **Social Worker of the Year Award** from the National Association of Social Workers, Louisiana Chapter. In 2013 they received both the **Play Therapist of the Year Award** and the **Lifetime Achievement Award** from the Louisiana Association for Play Therapy.

HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED cards

How to make the HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED cards:

1. Print this page
3. Cut along the dotted lines to make cards.
3. Write situations on the back of cards



Here's
What
Happened



Here's
What
Happened



Here's
What
Happened



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