

# HELPING STUDENTS COPE WITH STRESS

**C**aitlin,\* an above-average 5th grader, sits at her desk and stares out the window. Her reading book is unopened. The teacher, who is reviewing the homework assignment, notices that Caitlin is not paying attention and asks, "What do you think, Caitlin?"

Caitlin is startled at the mention of her name. "I don't know," she answers, avoiding eye contact.

"Did you read your homework assignment last night?"

\*Names have been changed to protect student privacy.

BY LANA MARTIN

With tears welming in her eyes, she finally manages, "A little. My mother told me that she and Dad are getting a divorce." Unable to hold back the tears any longer, Caitlin blurts out, "I don't want them to get a divorce!" and runs out of the classroom.

Mike, age 15, is a sophomore in an Adventist boarding academy in the Eastern United States. A gifted student and musician, he receives A's in his classes and plays the cello in the school band. In fact, Mike is so talented that on several occasions, he has even played with the symphony orchestra in his local community. His parents have sacrificed financially

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so Mike can develop his talent and become a professional cellist when he graduates from college. They expect him to maintain high academic standards, and hope that he will earn scholarships to help with college costs.

Mike is popular, but has little time to socialize, since he spends many hours completing his assignments and practicing the cello. Mike confides to his music teacher that he is tired and losing interest in music. He has not practiced for several days. When advised that he needs to take time for recreation, he tenses up. Mike says he fears that his parents would be very upset if his grades dropped or they discovered that he was not practicing. "I don't think I can make any changes. Maybe I should just end it all."

Jenny, a 3rd grader, frequently gets sent to the principal's office for starting fights with other students. "They make fun of me, so I hit them," she complains to the principal. She has difficulty concentrating on her schoolwork and is easily distracted by sounds and movement in the classroom. Jenny constantly gets up from her seat, in spite of her teacher's reminders to ask permission first. "Jenny just doesn't listen or obey," her teacher complains in frustration to the principal. "Maybe she should be sent to a special school." The principal suggests a parent conference.

Since Jenny's mother cannot take time off from work to attend a conference, arrangements are made for a late-afternoon appointment. A single parent, she works long hours at a low-paying job and has little time or energy left for Jenny or her 4-year-old brother who attends a day-care program while she works. It is hard for her to find someone to care for Jenny after school because of her hyperactive behavior.

Caitlin, Mike, and Jennifer all have one thing in common—*stress!*

At one time, the idea that children experienced stress appeared to be an oxymoron, but this is no longer true. Today, educators and parents are continually challenged to understand the dynamics of child/adolescent stress, and to identify effective coping skills that will strengthen student resistance to stress at school and at home.

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### **Stress and the Human Body**

Here's a simple example of the demands that stress puts on the human body. An elastic band is designed to expand to hold several items together, but when it is stretched beyond its capacity, it snaps. The word *stress* comes from the Latin *stringere*, meaning "to draw tight." Distress, or unhealthy stress, results when there is too much tension or pressure. However, there is a healthy form of stress called *eustress*, which is the normal tension needed to complete daily tasks.

Like elastic bands, human beings vary in their capacity to cope with stress. Research on stress among children and adolescents defines stress as events, situations, or circumstances "in which demands are perceived by the child or adolescent as exceeding his or her capacity to comfortably respond."<sup>1</sup>

Our bodies were created with an automatic general adaptation system triggered by perceived stressors or anything that causes an alarm reaction. The first reaction is known as the "fight or flight" mechanism.<sup>2</sup> Triggering the alarm produces physical and/or emotional responses such as stomach "butterflies," increased heartbeat and respiration, a rush of adrenalin, goose bumps, shaking, fear, shame, guilt, and panic. In this state, reactions will vary. The person may confront the stressor,

flee for safety, or become immobilized by fear. The second response to the alarm reaction is the body's effort to return to a more normal state. Serotonin, a chemical neurotransmitter secreted by the nerves, enables the stress alarm to be shut off and intercepts the fight-or-flight response to the stressor. Serotonin levels may be increased by diet and exercise, which also enhance one's sense of well-being under normal circumstances.

When the body experiences difficulty returning to a more normalized state after a stress alarm,

the third response occurs. Energy depletion from unresolved stress produces exhaustion.<sup>3</sup> Children, adolescents, and adults are at high risk physically and emotionally when they are exhausted from excessive stress.

**S**tressors range from the acute trauma that produces post-traumatic stress disorder to minor everyday hassles. Stressors may be circumstantial or chronic. Examples include divorce, violence, sexual abuse, sudden loss of a family member, or natural disasters such as tornadoes and hurricanes. Long-term chronic stressors include homelessness, poverty, discrimination, physical or mental handicaps, and local or national violence. Circumstantial stressors and daily hassles include quarrels, beginning a new school or job, parent/child or teacher/child conflict, insufficient time to complete a task or too many tasks battling for attention, fear of failure or competition, concerns about physical appearance, and peer rejection.

Studies suggest that the way an individual perceives a stressor has a significant influence on the amount of stress generated and on his or her choice of coping skills. The more severe the stress factors, the greater the negative impact for children and adolescents. Unre-

solved stressors can contribute to delinquency, suicidal thoughts, aggression, depression, illness, and chronic anxiety. The child or adolescent's capacity for coping with stress depends strongly upon his or her perception of whether it is possible to change the stressor or to adapt to what is seen as unchangeable and beyond one's control.<sup>4</sup>

**T**erri Richards, a school nurse in Ohio, and Corey Bates, professor of health education at Ohio State University, found that "due to the social stigma and financial cost of professional mental health care, school personnel may be the only resource for some children."<sup>5</sup> They further emphasized the need for a school health team, including the teacher, school social worker or counselor, nurse, administrator, and parents to provide a support system for students challenged by stress.

### Designing a Program to Combat Stress

Some schools have begun to train peer counselors to help students with their daily hassles. The keys for a successful program are education and training. Public and private school administrators and counselors must know how to network with community resources available to students, teachers, and parents.

What have we learned about developing student resiliency for coping with stress? Recent research studies have identified the following things that parents and educators can do to strengthen child and adolescent resiliency in coping with stress:<sup>6</sup>

- Providing parent/teacher support, control, and structure;
- Encouraging children to express feelings and ask for help;
- Affirming children by parents, educators, or other adults;
- Positively involving parents in children's activities and interests;
- Assessing individual children's temperaments and measuring their resiliency;
- Nurturing the capacity for humor;
- Fostering healthy self-esteem;

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- Helping children develop supportive friendships;
- Teaching social competency and problem-solving skills;
- Fostering the child's belief that he or she can effectively cope and achieve change;
- Encouraging children to ask questions;
- Providing fair, consistent, and protective discipline; and
- Nurturing faith in God.

In summary, children and adolescents who feel loved and connected to others, have healthy self-esteem, feel free to express themselves, are open to new ideas, and have faith in God are more resilient to stress, physically healthier, demonstrate fewer behavior problems, are less depressed, and use fewer aggressive strategies for coping with stressors.<sup>7</sup>

### Classroom Strategies

In the classroom and school environment, educators who are sensitive to their students' sense of self, provide alternative opportunities for improving academic achievement, and promote social skills-building activities can significantly help young people strengthen their resiliency for coping with stress.<sup>8</sup> School activities such as recess, rest periods, music, art, and physical education not only enhance health and creativity, but can also significantly reduce student stress.

Seventh-day Adventist educators and parents who teach and practice the seven natural principles for health—pure air, sunlight, rest, exercise, healthy diet, use of water, and trust in God<sup>9</sup>—

are providing both prevention and remedies for child/adolescent stressors. In these times of violence in the schools, educators' and parents' awareness and sensitivity to stress levels of children and adolescents are vital. Referral to professional help for students in distress must not be viewed as lack of faith in God. There is a great need today for students to experience safety and joy rather than violence and fear in their school and home settings.

In the book *Education*, Ellen White wrote, "Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today."<sup>10</sup> As we look to the 21st century, her words from a hundred years ago are even more timely and challenging. ☞

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