

Making Neuroscience Fun

A Brain Awareness Program for All Ages



Brain Health: It's SPECTacular

Story General Information

I Am So Stressed Out!!! (🌈 An Emotional Health Story) (4th Grade – 9-10 yrs.)

This story talks about stress and how it relates to emotional health and behaviors.

- A little bit of stress prepares our bodies for action and activates our sympathetic nervous system – also known as the “fight or flight” system. Too much stress can actually hurt your body and your brain.
- Stress acts on the same parts of your brain that control your emotions, so you need to identify how stressful situations make you feel and act and what kinds of situations you find stressful.
- By understanding how your emotions and behaviors change when you are stressed out, you can then control how you react to the stressful situation. This will help you to feel better about yourself and the situation, which is important for protecting your brain.

The facilitator begins by introducing themselves, neuroscience, and the program: Brain Health: It's SPECTacular. The facilitator breaks down the meaning of SPEC for the children and discusses how the letter E represents Emotional Health. Emotional Health is an important part of keeping the brain healthy and happy. In this story, the children learn about stress, its impact on the body and brain, and the sympathetic nervous system.

Some stress can be good for the body. It prepares the body and activates emotional parts of the brain. However, too much stress is harmful to the brain and body. The facilitator defines *stress* for the children and discusses a couple scenarios where a little stress is a positive experience; responsibility to score the game winning point or performing in a play. The facilitator follows by identifying feelings or negative responses to too much stress; angry, sad, insecure, scared, shutting down. These responses can indicate that the brain is not functioning correctly. The children review the two same scenarios through the lens of the person experiencing too much stress. The children can see how stress causes individuals to change their behaviors.

It is important to identify triggers of stress. The more someone understands causes of stress the more they are able to control a situation, prepare themselves, and protect their brain and body from the damages of too much stress. The facilitator and children brainstorm a list of situations that can trigger stress for people.

The type of stressful situation is also significant to identify. Some situations people are able to control. Other situations are out of their control. Everyone should have coping mechanisms to handle both types of stressful situations. The facilitator helps the children decipher between the two types. They also discuss methods for COPEing (referenced in previous Social Health story) for controllable situations such as making a plan, organizing, prioritizing, and practicing in preparation for an event that can cause stress. Learning these strategies can help keep the brain happy and healthy.

But what happens when the situation is out of the person's control? The facilitator shares several scenarios where someone cannot control what is happening to them or around them like moving away, adults fighting, and no personal space. Children should first learn to identify how the situation is affecting them, emotionally

and physically. Next, they should learn to advocate for themselves. The facilitator encourages the children to speak to people in their support system if they feel the situation is causing them too much stress. Finally, they should identify ways to COPE with the stress. Implementing these tactics can help lower stress levels.

Stress can cause people to behave in abnormal ways. The facilitator continues to discuss the same scenarios with the children. This time inserting rash behaviors in response to someone else's actions. The discussion focuses on the impact of stress on emotions. It can cause someone to lash out or lose control of their behavior. But, ultimately, everyone is responsible for their own actions. The facilitator emphasizes that it is imperative to identify those feelings of stress prior to them reaching a level where the stress affects behaviors negatively.

The greater the understanding of stressful triggers, the brain's response to them, and identifying COPEing mechanisms, the greater the chance of controlling oneself during stressful situations. Someone cannot always control a situation, but they can control themselves and their behavior's with the right tools. Being confident in handling stressful situations helps to ensure a happy, healthy brain. That is SPECTacular!

Story Objectives:

- Students will define *stress*.
- Students will describe when stress is good for the body and how the body responds.
- Students will identify times/activities that prompt "good" stress.
- Students will describe how too much stress affects the body and brain.
- Students will explain how stress and emotions are connected.
- Students will sort stressors into controllable and uncontrollable situation.
- Students will brainstorm how to prepare for stressful situations that are controllable/
- Students will identify different coping mechanisms to use when an uncontrollable stressful situation occurs.
- Students will describe how awareness, preparation, and coping mechanisms can improve the outcome of stressful situations and their Emotional Brain Health.