



Photo: Jonathan Wong

Under pressure: the rising crisis among Hong Kong students

Experts are offering coping mechanisms and positive perspectives to help young people struggling with stress, reports **Amanda Sheppard**

According to a 2024 survey by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 45 per cent of students identified their stress levels as high, rating them between seven and 10 on a 1-10 scale. These results marked the first increase in four years. With stress levels on the rise, so too are the physical and mental consequences. These can include sleep issues, headaches, changes in appetite, irritability, withdrawal and feelings of hopelessness.

Last month, it was reported that an 11-year-old boy in Tuen Mun had died after falling from a height. Police found a suicide note that could link the tragedy to academic pressures.

“Stress affects students deeply – emotionally and academically,” notes Evgeny Evseev, a counsellor at The Harbour School. “Too much stress can cause anxiety, disrupt concentration, trigger mood swings and interfere with sleep, all of which can block learning and motivation. Yet when stress is managed well, it can energise students, sharpen their focus and help them succeed.”

Dr Rachel Gregory, school psychologist at Harrow International School Hong Kong, adds that extensive stress can also have academic consequences, with students “sadly underachieving due to the level of chronic stress they have placed on themselves

and the detrimental mental health impact this can have”.

While stress is an inherently complex phenomenon often loaded with negative connotations, it is in its very essence a neutral force. “The simplest definition is that stress is a biological response to something that is happening to you. Stress can be seen as neither positive nor negative – the feeling or emotion comes from how we interpret those physical sensations,” explains Shelagh Hockley, head of guidance at Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS).

“We all experience stress and we cannot avoid this,” says Gregory, explaining that stress



Shelagh Hockley, Canadian International School of Hong Kong



Photo: Exam time at Hong Kong Teachers' Association Lee Heng Kwei Secondary School

signals the need for a change or management of a situation. "In the short term, during periods of acute stress, we need to adapt to the situation to help us cope and build resilience," she says.

"However, if stress continues to develop and it is more long-standing, it can develop into chronic stress that can lead to poor

physical and emotional health."

This is a facet that author and former high school teacher Dr Rebecca Heiss knows well. Heiss is the author of *Springboard: Transform Stress to Work for You*, which was released earlier this year. "[Stress] differs from the stress response, which is what most people are referencing when

they talk about stress," she says.

"That response is simply energy, not the enemy we've been taught to fear and eliminate."

"We live in a world where there are constant demands on our time and students feel that intensely as they try to balance school work, friends, family, sports and other commitments. If stress is a

constant, then we need to learn how to manage it rather than avoid it," Hockley advises.

Heiss agrees, adopting an unconventional approach and challenging norms around the concept of stress and the desire to reduce or even avoid it. "More stress means more power. I love using the example that Olympic athletes don't break world records at practice. They break them at the height of stress and pressure," she says. Heiss advocates for an effective framework to harness and utilise stress to optimise performance, "rather than trying to eliminate stress through self-care activities".

Heiss takes a three-pronged approach she has labelled the Fear(less) Stress Formula: "Step one: it's not a tiger. Recognise that this stressor won't actually kill us. I challenge people to invite the tiger in for tea, giving yourself three minutes to feel the stress, and acknowledge it with curiosity before trying to shift your energy." Step two involves harnessing that curiosity; this is the key to reinterpreting the meaning behind the nervous energy we associate with stress.

She calls step three the trajectory: "Action inspires motivation. When we take a small action in the direction of the stressor rather than avoid or run away from it, we gain agency and power." She challenges people to "run at the roar".

Within this framework, stress can be seen as a force for good. Evseev says that good stress has a name, although it's one most people are unfamiliar with. "Eustress pushes students to rise to a challenge – it's the excitement of preparing for a school play, the drive to study for an important test, the thrill of taking on a new responsibility," he notes. "This kind of stress sharpens our focus, fuels our growth and contributes to meaningful achievement."

Gregory agrees, adding that good stress can lead to physiological changes including an increased heart rate and breath rate. "A certain amount of stress can be helpful to improving performance – this is known as the Yerkes-Dodson Law," she explains.

There is a balance to strike, and remaining within an individual's natural stress limits can enhance memory, boost resilience and foster the development of effective coping skills. But be wary: go too far and stress may become "overwhelming, long term and cause disruption to our daily lives", Hockley warns. "Then we label it distress."

There are a wealth of ways that parents can support students experiencing distress and who need support to develop healthy coping skills. "One of the most helpful actions a parent can take is to listen to what their child is saying without reacting to this with advice," Gregory says. ➔



Photo: Canadian International School of Hong Kong

Hockley adds that validation does not need to equal agreement. “It is an acknowledgement that you can see that your child is struggling.” She encourages parents to avoid statements that may minimise a child’s feelings, and instead to highlight the visibility of their challenges and that they are available to support. Additionally, she encourages parents to focus on effort over outcome, and to prioritise rest: “It is beneficial for students to have free time, since that’s when their brains can rest and recharge.”

Heiss encourages parents to model healthy stress responses, and to “teach children that fear and stress are normal biological responses, not signs of weakness”. She sees empowerment as critical in parental support – parents should allow children to develop their own tools to respond to stress rather than only relying on others to problem-solve.

Students can also empower themselves by developing the right tools for their emotional and psychological toolkit. “Stress management, just like time

management, is a skill that can be taught,” says Hockley. She encourages students to use techniques like breathwork and positive self-talk to move away from catastrophic thinking styles.

“Stress isn’t something to eliminate: it’s energy you can use,” emphasises Heiss. “You should actively decide what deserves your fear and what is an ancient instinct pattern that needs updating.” When it comes to stress management tools, Gregory says these should include focusing on time management, developing realistic and achievable goals, and planning in advance, besides making sleep a priority as “studying late at night reduces the brain’s capacity to take in more information and work optimally”.

If you have suicidal thoughts or know someone who is experiencing them, help is available. In Hong Kong, you can dial 18111 for the government-run Mental Health Support Hotline.

You can also call 2896 0000 for The Samaritans or 2382 0000 for Suicide Prevention Services.



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DR REBECCA HEISS, AUTHOR



Some schools invite pupils to indicate how they’re feeling each day on the “feeling barometer”. Photo: Just Feel