

# Stress Balloon

**CASEL Core Competencies:** Self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making

**State Health Standards:** Standard 4, Standard 5, Standard 6, Standard 7, Standard 8

**Learner/Participant Objectives:** Practicing mindfulness and positive mental health, stress and emotional management

**Content Warnings:** Stressful situations, adverse and negative emotions

**Facilitator Tips:** Give the youth an example of how much air to blow into the balloon, or let out of the balloon, for each stressful situation. This makes it easier for participants to recognize the impact of both accumulating and releasing stress. This also prevents youth blowing up their balloon and releasing fully each time (this is common!)

**Key Terms:** Mindfulness, stress management, mental health

**Time:** 25 minutes

**Materials needed:** Balloons (1 per Participant)

**Background:** Stress is necessary, often helping us escape danger, perform under pressure, and motivating us to do our best. But too much stress, that feeling of being overloaded with too many things to do and not enough time to do them, can cause us to feel angry or agitated, withdrawn or depressed. Stress is both a mental and physical condition, and may trigger a headache, accelerated heartbeat, tense muscles, stomachache or indigestion, and sweaty palms. Along with rapidly changing bodies, minds, and emotions, young people deal with stress from school, friendships, parents/caregivers, siblings, romantic relationships, money, extracurricular activities, and uncertainty about the future. Stressors may look different for adults and youth, but nonetheless they are present and valid. Noting the range of stressors, learning to navigate them can be a powerful tool for young people as they are developmentally and physically mature.

**References:** This activity was adapted from TKF.

## Discussion Questions

- What are some things that stress you out?
- How can you handle stressful situations?

## Procedure

- Explain that stress is normal, and it is part of being human. Stress can be triggered by a variety of things, such as fatigue, an argument with a friend, schoolwork, etc. Stress can make us feel worried, nervous, anxious, angry, sad, or a combination of emotions. Being stressed can cause us to be unfocused or in more serious instances it can cause us to give up and avoid responsibility all together. Some may even cope

with stress by abusing alcohol, overeating, or even hurting those around them. Inform Participants that not only do people have a different tolerance for stress and how they manage it, but people are also triggered by very different things, and these are called stressors.

- Have each Participant share one thing that causes them stress.
- Explain that many things in life are stressful and that it is OK to be stressed. What matters is how we deal with stress.
- Explain that the balloons represent their hearts and all the hurt, anger, and stress that can be found inside of them.
  - Explain that when we feel stressed our hearts are filling up like this balloon. (Demonstrate by blowing a small amount of air into the balloon).
  - Each added stressor, or thing that stresses us out, is more air into our balloon. (Blow into the balloon again).
  - **Ask:** As things happen to us that are difficult or make us feel bad, what is happening to the balloon? (Answer: Getting bigger!)
  - **Ask:** What happens when our balloon is full, and we try to add more air? (Answer: It pops!)
- Explain that it is important that we manage and release stress to avoid bursting like the balloon. (Now release air from the balloon).
- Tell Participants: Listen to the story about Dakota's day. Dakota's day is full of stress; however, they have found ways to relieve their stress, so they does not "pop." As you listen to the story, blow air into your balloon when Dakota feels stress and release air as Dakota releases it.
- Hand each Participant a balloon and read "Dakota's Day." While reading, have each Participant identify a stressful situation (in red) by blowing air into the balloon and identify a coping skill/positive thing (in green) by letting air out of the balloon.
  - Dakota woke up in the morning to their **mother yelling at them** to get out of bed. They were very tired and not ready to get up, so they ignored her and stayed in bed. Dakota's mother came into the room and **pulled their covers off. Dakota felt very angry.** When Dakota's mother left the room, they sat up and **took three slow, deep breaths.** Dakota got dressed and headed to the kitchen for breakfast. Their little brother **was eating the last of their favorite cereal.** However, they saw a box of a new type of cereal they had never tried. They **decided to try it and really liked it.** After breakfast, Dakota finished getting ready for school and started walking. But because their friends had already left, Dakota **had to walk with the new kid in school that they did not know.** Dakota and the new kid started talking and they **quickly realized that they were really nice.** Dakota **got to school early,** so they **got to play before**

the bell rang. But while they were playing another kid came up to Dakota and began to tease and laugh at them. Dakota asked the kid to leave them alone, but the kid would not. Dakota decided to walk away and found some other kids to play with. Soon after, the bell rang to get to class. In class, Dakota realized they forgot to do their homework. The teacher had Dakota stay during recess to finish it. After school, Dakota's mom was late to pick them up and once they got home Dakota had to finish their chores before being allowed to play. Dakota was feeling very frustrated but once they finished their chores and played outside with friends, they started to feel better. When it started to get late, Dakota came inside to finish their homework and felt very proud of themselves for doing it. After dinner, Dakota showered and got ready for bed, feeling refreshed for the next school day.

- Ask Participants and discuss:
  - What kinds of things/events filled Dakota's balloon?
  - What did Dakota do to release the air/stress?
  - What else could have Dakota done to release air/stress out of their balloon?
  - What do you do to release air out of your balloon?
- Have Participants get in pairs and share with their partners what stresses them out? As a group discuss the following questions:
  - What kinds of things did you put inside your balloon?
  - How are you affected by the feelings you keep inside?
  - What kinds of things help you release air/stress?
  - How can you take care of yourself and manage your stress?
- Explain that sometimes our stress is too difficult to manage by ourselves.
  - Ask Participants who they can go to for help when they are stressed? (Ex: teacher, counselor, parent).
  - Remind Participants that this should be someone they can trust.
- In closing, ask Participants to give their balloon to someone at home that they trust, like giving their heart to someone, in exchange for that person being there for them when they need to talk and vent.
- At the next session, follow up by asking Participants who they gave their balloons/hearts to.