

Where You Are

S7 Special Episode — Stress in Students: Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools

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Bryn Askwith: While we work on our next season, we are sharing a special episode recently recorded that we think you'll love. Thanks so much for listening. This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith.

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge with respect and gratitude that the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre is located on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. We invite listeners today to pause and reflect on the lands that you're on as we begin this conversation.

Each season, we produce an episode for school professionals. After all, teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school staff spend a lot of time with students and really play a key role in promoting and supporting child and youth mental health and wellbeing. Today, I'm very happy to have Gail Markin, a counselor, author, and speaker, to help co host this episode. Gail may sound familiar to you as she's hosted previous episodes of Where You Are. Gail, so glad to have you back.

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Gail Markin: Thanks, Bryn. I'm happy to be here. For those listening, most of my work focuses on promoting mental health and wellbeing in education. I also work as a coach with the BC Children's Thriving School Communities Team. Our team works collaboratively to enhance capacity for system-wide changes in school communities to improve student mental health and wellbeing.

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Bryn Askwith: Gail, you are absolutely the perfect co-host for our episode today as we dive in and explore the topic of students and stress. I have to say, as a parent of two kids, one starting middle school and the other having just started high school, I can't help but feel like students are experiencing more stress than ever. From your perspective, Gail, why is that?

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Gail Markin: So I've been supporting students for a long time, and there is no question that they are feeling stress. And while experiencing some stress can be helpful for kids, it can help them rise to a challenge or motivate them to reach their goals, too much stress is overwhelming, especially if it lasts a long time. And they are also sharing how they're coping with that stress,

and it's not always in healthy ways. And just to provide a little background info here, in the Adolescent Health Survey, a BC province-wide survey given to students in grades seven to 12, nine out of 10 youth said that they experienced at least a little stress in the past month, and 13% reported feeling so stressed they could not function properly.

But what's also happening here is that this isn't just coming from students themselves. Teachers and other school staff are also reporting that they see an increase in stress and challenges in their classroom. So yes, when you put this all together, I think it's fair to say that this is very real. The good news is that there are ways that the school community and trusted adults in our schools can help students navigate it, so when stress does pop, up and it will, students can turn to healthy ways of coping, build skills and resilience, and do this in school environments where they can thrive.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Gail. I really love that context. It's so helpful. All right, so let's focus on the episode. Today, we'll take a closer look at what stress is and how it can show up in the body and its connection to student mental health and wellbeing. We'll hear from our guests on why students are experiencing increased amounts of stress, we'll learn about practical ways that school professionals can support students experiencing stress in grades K to 12, and of course share resources that school communities can look to. Let's get into that conversation. Our first guest today on the podcast is Connor, registered psychologist at BC Children's Hospital and education lead for the Compass Program. Welcome to Where You Are, Connor.

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Connor: Thanks. Happy to be here.

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Bryn Askwith: Connor, most of us have probably experienced stress in one way, shape, or form ourselves, but let's just clarify a few things. Can you start us off by explaining what stress is and how it can show up in children and youth?

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Connor: So stress is this actually very fascinating thing. So we experience stress neurochemically and biologically. When we have this new type of cognition where we can think about things and think about the future and imagine bad things, it's something that happens in our brain and in our body. A little bit of stress is good. It tells us get ready. Something important is going to happen. We need to be motivated. We need to do something. But when we have too much stress and it sits in our system for a really long time, then we're being inundated with a stress hormone, which just kind of exists there and it affects our mood, it turns off various things in your brain and in your body.

So when we see stress in kids, you might see a combination of emotional reactions and physiological reactions. So sometimes it'll come up as headaches, stomach aches, being nauseous, feeling uncomfortable, having difficulty eating, having difficulty sleeping. But you

might also see mood changes like I am more irritable, you're more sensitive. You might find that your kid or your student is reacting to things they might not have reacted to because at baseline they're just more sensitive. Because the more things that we're stressed about, it builds up so we can have bigger reactions because we only have so many resources to cope.

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Bryn Askwith: That is a fantastic explanation to start us off.

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Gail Markin: Also joining us in the podcast today is Connie Easton. Connie worked for many years as the Coordinator for Mental Health, Social Emotional Learning and Counseling at the Richmond School District in Richmond, BC. She holds an MA in counseling psychology from UBC and was a secondary school counselor for 23 years prior to working at the district level. Thanks for being here, Connie.

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Connie Easton: Thank you so much, Gail. I'm really excited to be part of this conversation.

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Gail Markin: So let's focus on stress for students at school specifically. As a counselor supporting schools, what are some common causes of stress for students? And could you give us some examples for both elementary school and high school age students?

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Connie Easton: So when we think about stress at school for our students, we have to remember that of course, school is only part of their day. They're coming to school carrying that invisible backpack that's filled with a lot of the stressors that are happening outside of the school hours. Those include family pressures, particularly around changes in the family, both positive and those that are more stressful, separation, divorce, parents that are living elsewhere. We have many students that have families spread around the globe. Family income pressures in terms of housing security and food insecurity. Then there are the transitions, new classes, new teachers, friends leaving, friends coming into the picture, the school pressures that are happening around assignments and tests. For students that are transitioning in terms of secondary, all of those pressures around new choices and new opportunities and how to take advantage of those.

For students that are transitioning out of secondary, all of the decisions that have to happen around post secondary applications and their plans, some of the achievement pressures that are coming from home, their own personal goals that they set for themselves around what it means to achieve, the social challenges of making and keeping friends, the conflicts that are part of just daily life in those relational challenges that happen. And of course, as students become more mature, those relational challenges take on a bigger role in their lives as they begin to navigate personal relationships, romantic relationships, making and keeping friends,

working in teams, dealing with conflict. So when we think of all that, it's no wonder that kids are stressed.

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Bryn Askwith: Another guest with us today is Kira, an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia Sauder School of Business. Kira brings a student-centered perspective to conversations around navigating academic and extracurricular stress and sustainable success. Kira, thanks for being here today on the podcast.

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Kira: Thank you guys so much for having me.

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Gail Markin: So Kira, you just heard Connie and Connor talk about some of the common school-related stressors. Did any of those resonate with you?

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Kira: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, stress honestly feels like such a complicated word. For me, a student that feels pressure from parents, family, school, and from themselves to succeed, that is one of the main reasons for me. I feel like the biggest source of stress for me growing up has always been self-inflicted pressure, the pressure to succeed, the pressure to do well. In today's world, you have to work so much harder to distinguish yourself, and that's what I noticed within students. You have so many different opportunities that are flying at you. For example, in post-secondary school, a lot of my peers are using LinkedIn. They're constantly on LinkedIn and they're reaching out to people for internships, for opportunities. They're networking early on, and then it starts to become earlier and earlier and earlier. In fact, I started my LinkedIn when I was in grade 11 when I first took my first business class, and it was something that students were already doing.

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Connie Easton: Wow.

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Gail Markin: It's so interesting to hear a student's perspective. Thank you for that. I'm also thinking about for school professionals listening to this episode. Just wondering, Connie, do you have any thoughts around why students seem to be feeling more stress?

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Connie Easton: I think the immediacy of social media and technology results in a feeling that students are always feeling like they're on and that everything that they do has an impact. How many likes am I getting? How many followers do I have? Is what I'm saying and doing showing up? So there's a very performative part of being in the world today, and that impacts students' sense of self in terms of how they perform, but also their relationships and how they show up to others. And that's really difficult because it feels like there's always a sense of having to manage

things. So that's one big stress that students are dealing with. All of that uncertainty that we talked about also results in a lot of stress in terms of a lot of rumination. Oh no, what's going to happen? What will happen next? Where will I be? How can I manage that?

So those kinds of worries begin to take on a life of their own. And in my conversations with students as a counselor, what I'm hearing is more and more of, "I don't even know if I should bother. Should I just give up? I don't know what to do. I feel overwhelmed. There's too much." So that sense of helplessness is another, I think, byproduct of all of the uncertainty and the amount of information that students are having to navigate and the number of choices that they're faced with. I think slowing it down and really focusing on what can we control, the circle of control, what is it that is in our immediate sphere of influence? How can we manage that? And really recognizing there are some universal themes and some universal things that we do not have control over immediately. And so can we let those go for now and focus on what we can manage? I think that's one of the messages for educators and counselors out there for sure.

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Kira: I love what you said about immediacy. What I'm noticing a lot of the times is business hours are not just Monday to Friday. They are after I get home from school, before school, weekends. In fact, mostly weekends. That's when I catch up on a lot of extracurricular work, get onto my emailing, et cetera. It happens a lot. And it is an expectation as well for you to be on Microsoft Teams or Slack to respond to your other team members as soon as possible.

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Gail Markin: So Connor, as someone who supports child and youth mental health and wellbeing, what would you like to talk to school professionals about why students seem to be facing more stress?

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Connor: The first kind of thing I want to really point out is that feeling of overwhelm where people just want to shut down and stop doing things, that's actually an expected pathway of the stress response. So there's this part of our brain, it's called the HPA access. It regulates that cortisol release, that stress response. And if it's active for too long, if the stress is too chronic, it doesn't go away, you don't have a baseline, your literal nervous system just can't do it anymore. And so we see that exhaustion, that shutdown because you are just depleted of resources to cope. So that's a normal and expected thing. And one of the best ways to target that is things that help bring down and relax the nervous system. And so some of the things to do when you're in that realm of the student is I'm so overwhelmed, I'm shut down, I can't do anything.

So the first thing we have to bring them back down to a slightly lower level. And so these are things like slow, deep paced breathing. My favorite is progressive muscle relaxation. You just tighten everything up and then let it go. So a cue for this for little kids too is pretend you're squeezing a lemon and you're trying to squeeze all the juice out and then stop. What's great about this too is that you can do it with your hands, you can do it with your feet, you can do it

with your leg muscles. So it's something that students find that can be approachable. You can do it right before your test while you're sitting in your desk without drawing attention and making a big deal. And if they're in a space that's private, you can also do cool water on your face or ice on your wrists. That also helps trigger that parasympathetic response to help bring you down. Or intense exercise. So that might be you do 20 jumping jacks or 20 pushups, and it basically kind of tricks your brain into being like, "Hey, that adrenaline and cortisol you're feeling was from this exercise." And then the exercise stops and your parasympathetic nervous system turns on again to help bring you down.

The other piece that I have that I think is really important is just coming at it from a validation lens. You can go really far by just not creating more stress of, "Oh, this adult doesn't believe me. They don't take me seriously. They aren't listening." And just starting with validating that emotion, that overwhelm, that sense of they can't do it anymore, that sense of things are hard. Especially, and sometimes this is hard for folks, especially if the behavior you're seeing because of stress is irritability and acting out and being more difficult, oftentimes those behaviors are a way of saying, "Hey, I'm struggling. Take me seriously." And we can bring down a lot of the conflict and struggle in trying to address those students' needs by first just meeting them with acknowledging and embracing and really just letting them know that that emotion is valid.

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Bryn Askwith: That is such a great summary of some of the ways that we can add to our toolbox in terms of helping to manage or cope with some of that stress in our day-to-day lives. Connie, hearing some of Connor's ideas and strategies proposed, is there anything you'd like to add to that?

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Connie Easton: I think as school counselors, we do really help students to add those to their toolbox wherever we can. And for many students, that also involves going outside. So going for a walk, taking a few minutes just to breathe outside, reconnecting with nature. I think the other thing that you brought up that's so important and that ties to schools specifically is the idea of a routine. So really school often becomes that safe place for many students. It's the one place in sometimes a world of chaos that they know when they come through the door, they know what to expect. Those expectations, if they can be as clear as possible all the way from K to 12, that helps students to feel like they can regulate because they know what's coming next. For many educators, that has been reinforced by the work that's happening at the ministry level, through the mental health and school strategy, in the whole idea of creating spaces of connection and belonging in schools, in creating classroom communities where students have a voice and they have input into what's happening in their day, in teachers using social emotional learning and those strategies to help connect kids with the things that can help.

There's so many great programs that are evidence-informed that teachers can use in classrooms starting in kindergarten all the way through to grade 12. So there's wonderful programs that can be woven into the learning that happens in classrooms. And I think that's one of the most incredible advantages of schools is that it's a place where all students can hear

those messages and then teachers and counselors can reinforce that learning and then help bridge that learning to the outside world. Because the other big piece of this are families and parents, and having that conversation go home is really, really important. So having kids go home and talk about what they're learning, having conversations that are intergenerational around mental health helps reduce stigma and provides those opportunities for students to practice what they're learning.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Connie. And to your point, there are some great provincial resources and programs about stress and stress management for students, and we've added links to some of those in our show notes for our school professionals listening to check out.

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Gail Markin: You're listening to Where You Are. I'm your co-host, Gail Markin. To learn more about the work BC Children's does to support wellbeing in school communities, including resources that can be helpful to school professionals, visit keltymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals. Are you a teacher, administrator, or school staff member? Take some time to share out the Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre as a hub for free mental health and substance use information and resources for BC families in your school community. Tell parents and caregivers about our website, podcast, webinars, and more by sending them to keltymentalhealth.ca.

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Bryn Askwith: Kira, you've really brought an amazing student perspective to this conversation. So curious to know what's been helpful for you in terms of strategies or tools to help manage your stress.

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Kira: Yeah. For me personally, exercise has always been the biggest channel of stress relief for me. Really, it's not just the exercise, but it's the fact that I'm valuing this part of my life.

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Bryn Askwith: Connor, is there anything you would want to say, healthy versus unhealthy coping mechanisms and how really school professionals might be able to support students through those?

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Connor: One thing that I was thinking about in terms of school professionals and things that folks can do is also just finding ways as much as you can to build in breaks. We're in this period where everything feels like you have to do it now, we have to go right to the next thing, and folks aren't getting enough time that's just downtime. And so building just more intentional time to slow down and not have to do things I think goes really far. But then thinking about healthy versus unhealthy coping mechanisms, what's hard is that some things can be healthy in a small

amount and then unhealthy in a large amount. So it's hard to say uniformly all technology is an unhealthy coping mechanism.

o I think one of the ways to really think about is this a healthy positive coping mechanism, is it doing something for me is to think about, is it detracting from other things that make me feel good? Does it actually make me feel good, helpful, rested? Do I feel like it's taking time out of things that I should be doing or making other things harder? So one thing to ask yourself is it getting in the way of me getting enough hours of sleep, of me getting the things that I value done? And then the other thing is we know from research that a lot of youth are engaging in things like substance use as a way to relieve stress, to help them feel better. And so they might then be asking themselves, is this potentially going to get me in trouble? Is the way that I'm using, is it unhealthy? Do I feel like I can't give this thing up or do something else in its place? Might be some of the other ways you might know, ooh, maybe this isn't the best thing for me.

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Bryn Askwith: What are some things that we could be doing as a school community that can be supporting students who are stressed or students who are experiencing stress? And then what can we be doing at a systems level, so maybe within school districts, et cetera?

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Gail Markin: Connie, you talked a few of the things that the school community can do to support. And then there's the larger system. And one of the things that always comes up for me as well when I think about communities and the school systems supporting students is that support for adult wellbeing as well. There's this really fascinating study that was actually done here in BC by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl and Dr. Eva Oberle. What they did is they asked teachers to self-report their stress levels, and you probably won't be surprised to hear that the higher the teachers' reported stress level, the higher the cortisol levels of the students. So of course this is a correlational study, so we can't really say which came first, but in some ways it really doesn't matter because we know they're related. And so we know that stress and actually calm as well are contagious. So we impact each other's stress levels. So it's really important as we're talking about student stress is we also consider the adults who work in our schools and our school districts because we need to think about the stress level of all of the people within our system and how that impacts learning.

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Connie Easton: Yeah, those are great points, Gail. And I think part of what helps staff, like in terms of the educators in the system, is to work alongside students and for students to have opportunities to have voice and agency. And I know that my work with Kira as an example, having the opportunity to be a student leader in this field, to work teaching your peers about mental health and the strategies that support your mental wellness helps you as a student to manage your own mental health. And also for the staff working alongside, it's so empowering for us to see students grow into that leadership space and to take on this work. I think that is something that is so important in terms of helping to really support students in this world is to give them roles where they can become advocates for themselves around mental health and also become leaders in this field.

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Bryn Askwith: Kira, you've been involved in peer-based programs that focus on connecting students in elementary and even high schools with healthy ways to manage stress. So can you talk a bit about that and why it was important for you to be involved?

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Kira: Absolutely. It was a youth-driven workshop program. It's still running to this day. And the mission of this program is to go to elementary schools, specifically feeder schools, to whichever high school that the facilitators are from, and to go into grade six classrooms, grade seven classrooms, and speak to those students about coping strategies and also just mental health awareness so that they have a baseline understanding before they transition over to secondary school where they're a little bit on their own, they're going to have a harder workload, they're going to be more involved with extracurricular activities. So as student leaders, you're able to relate to those elementary school students a little bit more and be like, "Hey, I know what it feels like to transition to high school and be confused, stressed out, and feel a lot of pressures that you haven't felt before. Here are some coping strategies that might help you out in the future. Here are some things to keep in mind. And when you hear words like mental health, mental illness, and stress, this is what it means," so that there's not a stigma around it anymore, so that there's not confusion that surrounds it anymore. And I think that this program is extremely powerful in changing the narrative of what it means to have stress.

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Bryn Askwith: Oh, thanks so much, Kira, for sharing that.

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Gail Markin: Each episode, we always ask our guests if they have final thoughts or words of wisdom that they'd like to share with school professionals listening. Connor, something you'd like to share before we end here today?

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Connor: Yeah, I think the biggest takeaway I have is to find ways and find time in your routine to encourage just a little bit of slowing down and a little bit of mindfulness.

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Kira: For me, it would be making time for the things that matter apart from extracurriculars in school. And your success in life, in your work life, in your home life, and in your extracurriculars is not going to be sustainable until you learn how to properly navigate your academic and extracurricular stress day-to-day.

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Gail Markin: Thanks, Kara. And Connie, final thoughts?

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Connie Easton: Well, what I see, it occurs to me that the common theme here is about relationships. So this is about our own relationship to stress and our relationships that matter in our world. And I think for educators, building those relationships with our students is so key in providing a buffer for stress for them.

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Bryn Askwith: Thank you so much to each of you today for spending your time with us, for sharing such amazing insights, experiences, practical strategies that school professionals can be reaching to and connecting with. This has been fantastic. What a great conversation.

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Connor: It was great to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

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Connie Easton: Thank you.

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Connor: Thank you so much.

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Gail Markin: To our school professionals listening today, thanks for making time for this episode of Where You Are.

00:26:17

Bryn Askwith: Big thanks to you, Gail, as my co-host. It's been absolutely wonderful. If you enjoyed today's conversation, please leave us a rating where you might be listening now. Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Paula Baker with audio engineering by Sam Seguin, audio production by JAR Podcast Solutions.

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