Better to prevent than cure
A psycho-educational program for stress control for students at K.U.Leuven
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Background

Developmental tasks in the adolescence often causes **stress** and **adaptation difficulties**

Not all these students need therapy! **Enhancing their coping strategies** may be sufficient and is important in the prevention of mental health problems.
A psycho-educational program in stress-control

**Shortcomings** in the way mental health is organized according to **Jim White**:

- High prevalence of psychological problems
- Individual therapy is still the golden standard, but has limitations:
  - High threshold
  - Not cost-effective
  - Focus on treating (instead of preventing)
A psycho-educational program in stress-control

Jim White proposes an approach that is:

- Educational
- Preventive
- Accessible and cost-effective

As a first step in a stepped-care model of mental health
A short course in stress management for a large group of students

- 6 weekly sessions of 2h
- Not a group therapy, but a course!
- No therapist-patient contact but a teacher-student contact
- Workbook included
- Aim: 1. increase knowledge about stress
  2. increase skills for handling stress
- Based on cognitive behavior therapy principles
Implementation in SHC

Arguments
- We can reach up to 60 students
- Adolescence period as critical period for learning coping skills
- Educational form = familiar setting for students

Adjustments
- Illustrations and examples of student life
- Instead of workrelated problems, study-related problems:
  - Fear of failure, procrastination
Content of the course

1. General introduction and information about stress

   - Aim of the training
   - Content of the other sessions
   - Workable model of stress
   - Vicious circle: thoughts, actions, physical aspects
   - Personal assessment
It can be caused by a wide range of factors but we focus on what keeps it going.
When we get **stressed:**

- panic
- Stress-Thoughts (session 3)
- depression
- Stress-Body (session 2)
- Stress-Behavior (session 4)
- sleeping problems
Content of the course

2. Physical aspects

- Stress and fight-flight mechanism
- Basic principles of relaxation
- Exercise in ventral respiratory and progressive relaxation
- CD and relaxation diary: practicing!
Content of course

3. Cognitive aspects

- Negative automatic thoughts and thinking styles
- Practicing through ABCD schedules (Ellis & Beck)
Content of the course

4. Behavioral aspects

- Problem-solving skills (8-step plan)
- Exposure-principle: confrontation
- Assertiveness
Content of the course

5. Specific stressrelated issues:
   Anxiety, Panic and Sleeping problems

- Panic: approach on 3 ways (phys, cogn, exposure)
- Sleep difficulties
6. Specific stressrelated issues:
   Depressive feelings and Study related problems
   - Depressive feelings
   - Fear of failure and procrastination
   - Brief summary
   - Get to work!
Characteristics of the course

- Educational nature
  No personal contribution from students expected in sessions

- Free and non-committal character
  They come and go whenever they want

- Very accessible

- Aimed at enhancing self-confidence and sense of control
• a change in our perspective towards stress

Our goal is not to delete stress (because stress is inevitable) but to search for the best way to deal with it

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aDXM5H-Fuw
Stressstraining at SHC: practical

- Started in 2004, > 1000 students have participated
- Open to: all faculties of K.U.Leuven, incl. PHD students
  - 2 high colleges in Leuven
- Published on the website and by mailing
- On a weekday evening, in a seminar room, ppt
Findings and conclusions

- Drop-out rather small
- Little interaction during the session
- Most personal questions in break or after class
- Feedback = very positive
- Since 2004 a permanent treatment in our center