

LESSON 4

Understanding Stress & Managing Transitions

Approximate
time required:

🕒 60 min

LEARNING GOALS

- Normalize stress related to change.
- Increase knowledge needed to care for well-being during times of transition.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Co-develop success criteria with students using the following questions: “How will we know we are achieving our learning goals? What will it look like/ sound like?”

For example:

- I can normalize stress related to change.
- I can recognize unbalanced thoughts and find balanced alternatives.

BIG IDEAS

- Change—even positive change we are looking forward to—can cause stress.
- Everyone experiences stress and there are strategies that can help manage it.



CONSIDERATIONS

- Appreciate the diversity amongst students, each with different aspirations and goals, influenced by unique identities and lived experiences. Offer validation and support to empower students to explore their options without judgement or limitation. Help students to identify and build on their unique strengths.
- Remember that some students may experience more stress than others. For example, some students face more daily stressors related to historic and current systemic oppression, marginalization, ableism and racism (e.g., microaggressions).
- Recognize that some sources of stress may be modifiable (e.g., learning difficulties, interpersonal conflict) while others may be more difficult to control (e.g., chronic medical condition, impact of poverty). This is when it may be particularly important for others to step in and offer support.
- The focus on emotions may be difficult for some students. Offer a range of ways of participating in this learning, to ensure students who feel unsafe/uncomfortable discussing emotions at school can still benefit from this learning.
- Be prepared to connect students to additional support, if needed. Refer to the following resources for more information and take time to consider your school and board circle of support and service pathways. Know what to do and who to connect with if a student seems like they might be struggling.
- [One-Call Desk Reference](https://smho-smso.ca) (smho-smso.ca)
- [Talking with Parents and Families about Mental Health](https://smho-smso.ca) (smho-smso.ca)
- [Circle of Support and System Pathways – Flowchart](https://smho-smso.ca) (smho-smso.ca)

MATERIALS/HANDOUTS

[Student Notebook](#)

- 4.1 – Balanced Self-Talk Activity

[PowerPoint Slides](#)

- Identifying Thoughts, Managing Emotions & Strategies for Personal Wellness

ADDITIONAL TEACHER REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- [Thought Changing Virtual Field Trip](https://smho-smso.ca) (smho-smso.ca)

Note: The content of this lesson was repurposed from the School Mental Health Ontario resource [MH LIT: Student Mental Health in Action Expansion Pack 2: The Challenges of Change: Navigating the Transition from Secondary School](#).



INTRODUCTION

 5 min

Slide 1 : Introduction

Slide 2 : We are learning...

- » To normalize stress related to change.
- » To increase knowledge needed to care for well-being during times of transition.

MINDS ON

 10 min

Warm up

Slide 3 : Warm up

Teacher prompt: “Today, we’re going to reflect on the transition from secondary school and discuss some of the emotions we might feel as we move on to that next phase. Before we begin, I want you to take a moment to think about this transition and the feelings it evokes. Consider what three words come to mind when you think about moving on to whatever you are pursuing next. These words can be related to your hopes/dreams, emotions, challenges, or anything else that captures the essence of this transition.”

Ask students: What are three words that come to mind when you think about transitioning from secondary school and moving on to whatever you are pursuing next.

Why transitions might be stressful?

Slide 4: Why transitions might be stressful?

Teacher prompt: “Stress is defined as the pressure, tension, physical discomfort, and sometimes worry that comes from many different situations, like when we have a big test coming up, we are trying out for a team, or we are excluded from our peers or made fun of for something that’s important to us. Sometimes even things we are looking forward to can cause stress, such as graduation, a big party, or a class trip, because they require us to adapt, grow, and try new things”.

Slide 5 : Teacher prompt: “It can feel confusing to look forward to moving on from secondary school and then find parts of the experience stressful when it arrives. We may wonder if we’ve made the right choices or if we are handling things well. But it’s okay to feel some stress related to transition—in fact, it’s to be expected, and those feelings are just as valid as the excitement, we may feel...”

Share the following with students:

- » Moving on from secondary school is a **big life transition**. A life transition is any major life event that alters our sense of self, our purpose, and how we go from day to day. (Source of definition: Jennifer Katzenstein, PhD)



- » Change—even good change we are looking forward to—can cause stress. Even things like getting a promotion at work or taking a vacation can cause stress because they require us to adapt and grow.
- » Some students may not feel ready to move on from secondary school and were still hoping for more from the experience (e.g., more time with friends, more time in the classroom, more time to make memories, more time to prepare for what is coming next).
- » Students often see an idealized version of what life ‘should’ look like after secondary school and receive messages that they are lucky to experience this phase of life or that this is the best time of their lives.
- » There are also many life events outside of our control that can add to the amount of change we deal with and the stress we need to manage.

Slide 6 : **Introduce activity** - Examples of elements that come with the transition from secondary school that may be either **CHALLENGING** or **EXCITING**.

NOTE: A discussion guide with examples of challenging and exciting elements is available in Appendix A.

Optional: you can ask students to: answer anonymously online (*Mentimeter, Jamboard, etc.*), give their answers out loud, sit or stand up or to move to one side of the classroom or the other depending on their answer.

Slides 7-14 :

Examples

Educators should feel free to poll responses to these examples using their judgement (ex., openly and collectively as a large group vs having students individually reflect).

Educator note: while a number of things may be common among students, there are also many individual factors (e.g., environment, history, and life events) that will make each person’s experience unique. Although it is a change for everyone, it can look different for different people. Students may be graduating, moving away from home to attend a new school, continuing to live at home, returning to secondary school for additional courses, starting new jobs, and so on. There are many pathways to success.

Slide 15: **Teacher prompt:** “We can’t choose when we will experience stress, but we can choose how we get ready for it. That’s what we’re going to learn more about today. I would also encourage you to think about the people we have in our school to help you plan for your future, such as our guidance staff. Reach out to them early and often! Reach out to other people in your life who are there to help, too, such as your parents/ caregivers, mentors, Elders, coaches, and other trusted adults.”

Educator note: it may be helpful to continue to provide reminders throughout the lesson about help available as students work toward graduation.



ACTION TASK (Consider self, others, careers) 35 min**Pathway stress**

Slide 16 : **Teacher prompt:** “One source of stress that can come with transitioning out of high school is the pressure to choose the perfect pathway. That can involve things like the following:

- » Managing personal expectations (e.g., achieving certain grades, getting into a certain program or getting a certain job, feeling that their decision about what they want to pursue after secondary school is permanent or not easily changed).
- » Handling pressure from others (e.g., parent/caregiver encouragement to make certain pathways or career choices).
- » Being in a competitive environment, like in high school, can sometimes exist (e.g., when applying for post- secondary programs or to jobs with limited spots available).
- » Societal expectations (there is often societal emphasis on pursuing higher education as the norm after secondary school, students who choose a different path may feel pressure to conform that leads to a sense of being different or left out).
- » Some students feel they lost time during the pandemic, and for many it was a stressful period to make decisions about post-secondary.”

Educator note: The pressure to pick the perfect pathway may be experienced differently by different students. For example, due to historic and current systemic racism, racialized students sometimes report needing to excel just to be considered for opportunities others readily receive. This can place increased pressure on them. For example, newcomer students whose families have relocated or been displaced may also experience increased pressure to succeed academically, for a variety of complex reasons. Knowing your students, and showing sensitivity in your examples, can help to ensure that conversations respect the values and experiences of every student in the class.

Slide 17 : **Teacher prompt:** “When faced with a life circumstance over which we have little or no control, it is easy to let our emotions or unhelpful or unbalanced thoughts take the lead. These thoughts are common like, “this is impossible” or “I’m not good enough”, but oftentimes we can tune them out and move on. Sometimes though, unhelpful thinking starts to become a habit, and can influence our mood and well-being. Catching these thoughts early, and challenging them with more helpful and balanced thoughts, is a helpful coping strategy.”

“We’re going to complete an activity to help you consider a balanced way to think about the pathway choice and some of the related pressures. Looking at things in a balanced way involves noticing all aspects of a situation—the positive, negative, and neutral, not just the ones you are stressed about.”

“But first, here are a few tips.”



Slide 18 : Quick tip

Teacher prompt: “When listening to your self-talk, ask yourself...

- » How likely is it?
- » Is there another way to think about things?
- » Are there other explanations or viewpoints?”

Slide 19 : Quick tip

“Try to catch yourself saying you ‘should’ do things (I should do, act, feel better).

“Should’ often just makes us feel guilty and judge ourselves.”

Slide 20: Quick tip

Teacher prompt: “Consider what you would say to a friend. Most of us would never be friends with someone who spoke to us the way we sometimes speak to ourselves. We deserve compassion and support, too.”

Slide 21 : Examples

Read the examples.

Slides 22-27 :

Let’s practice!

Teacher prompt: “We will now practice how to find balanced thoughts to overcome unbalanced thoughts. I will read an unbalance thought statement and you will offer some alternative suggestions.”

Optional: You can ask students to add their ideas to a white board or *Jamboard*.”

CONSOLIDATION 10 min**Slide 28 : Debrief**

Debrief the activity.

- » What were some of your takeaways from this activity?
- » Did you find it easy or difficult to find alternative balanced thoughts?

Invite students to add their reflections to their notebook.



Teacher prompt: “We can sometimes think negatively about ourselves, our abilities, and our futures. But that doesn’t mean they are true, and this kind of thinking can add to our stress. When you notice unhelpful thoughts happening, challenge them! Try to talk back to them with more balanced thinking. Balanced thinking isn’t the same as positive thinking. It’s fair and realistic thinking that looks all aspects of a situation (the positive, negative, and neutral), not just one point of view.”

Slide 29 : Notebook reflection

This activity can be done in class or at home.

Teacher prompt: “You are now invited to think about how you would respond to some of your unbalanced thoughts. You can add your answers in your notebook.”

Reminder: The notebook is for personal reflection only.

Wrap Up



Slide 30 : Breathing exercise

Teacher prompt: “We will end today’s lesson with a brief activity that helps manage stress, which is the topic for our next lesson. You’re invited to take a big breath. Deep breathing can help still our minds, calm our bodies, and control feelings of stress. The following video is offered to guide you.”

[Video link](#)

Slide 31 : Wrap up

- » Change, even positive, can be stressful.
- » We all have unbalanced thoughts... to avoid having these add to your stress, it’s important to challenge them with balanced thinking.



Appendix A

Transitioning from Secondary School Discussion Guide

NOTE: Focusing on challenges may be discouraging for some students. Share a limited number of examples and balance the discussion with what makes transitioning from secondary school exciting. In addition, educators should be mindful that certain communities may disproportionately experience challenges due to historical and current systemic racism.

TRANSITIONING FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL DISCUSSION GUIDE	
Exciting	• finishing grade school/getting a diploma • moving on to something new and different • prom and other special events • greater independence • the chance to focus more on what you like/are interested in • going away for school or work • anticipating meeting new people and having new experiences • a feeling of closure • feeling one step closer to the future you want
Challenging	• lots of decisions to make - choosing a career path, where to apply for school or a job, where to live, who to live with, etc. • personal issues - becoming more independent - figuring out your identity and who you want to be - peer pressure, body image worries, issues with parents/caregivers • pressures and worries - pressure to “grow up” - competition to get into certain programs/certain jobs - maintaining or improving your grades

GUIDE DE DISCUSSION POUR LA TRANSITION APRÈS L'ÉCOLE SECONDAIRE

**Challenging
(continued)**

- high expectations for success from your family
- high expectations for success from yourself
- concerns about finances and how to pay for everything
- thinking about the changes coming (e.g., new school, new city, new living space, new job, new people, more independence, more bills, more responsibilities, being away from family, etc.)
- worries about whether you will achieve personal goals (e.g., graduating, getting into certain programs, getting certain jobs, getting scholarships/awards to support you, and so on)
- worries about friendship groups changing
- being too busy
 - homework
 - family responsibilities
 - college/university/job applications
 - jobs
 - clubs, sports, and other activities
 - graduation and prom
 - clubs, sports et autres activités
 - graduation and prom

