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Evelyn Gallegos

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Increasing College Students' Awareness of Healthy Coping Strategies to Manage Stress

Evelyn Gallegos

A Capstone project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

## **Introduction**

College students often lack awareness of healthy coping strategies to manage stress. College students experience stress due to the number of responsibilities, such as having a job or being a student-athlete, as well as keeping up with coursework. Stress can result in feelings of being overwhelmed, depression, lower academic performance, and even a risk of dropping out. When college students learn healthy strategies to cope with stress, it improves their overall mental and physical well-being. To address the lack of stress management awareness, I created a one-day workshop for college students who are members of the Women's Soccer Club at California State University, Monterey Bay, in Marina, California.

## **Needs Statement**

As college students are pursuing degrees of their choice, they are gaining their independence, meeting new people, and experiencing high levels of stress. For emerging adults, attending college may be a challenging life transition (Bartlett et al., 2020). 10% to 12% of college students experience extreme stress during school (Peer et al., 2015). Individuals in the developmental period of emerging adulthood may have difficulty coping with these stress levels due to the pressure they face in society (Kumar & Bhukar, 2013). Students who have experienced stress and mental health problems tend not to seek help (Hubbard et al., 2018). A high degree of stress as a college student may result in adverse outcomes that can affect mental health, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.

Mental well-being is an essential aspect of each stage of development and is becoming more prevalent among college students. One of the mental health problems that college students encounter after starting college is psychological stress (Holland, 2016). Psychological stress prevents functioning and processing any kind of distress properly. Some factors associated with

this type of stress include academic stress, anxiety about finding employment and becoming successful in the future, and distancing themselves from their support system (Udhayakumar & Illango, 2018). Sharp and Theiler (2018) assessed the mental health of college students and found that 46% felt hopeless, 31% felt depressed to the point where they could not function, 38% felt anger, and 48% felt anxiety. Numerous research studies have demonstrated the relationship between poor academic performance and stress (Nadeem & Muhammad, 2012). The stress college students experience results in what is known as academic-related stress, continuously experiencing stress because of their education (Pascoe et al.,2020). In a study, college students were asked to list the stressors affecting their academic performance. It revealed that 53% of students indicated that the course load is the primary source of stress affecting their grade point average (Nadeem & Muhammad, 2012). The lack of social support from peers and professors also influences how students succeed. Social support encourages college students to excel in their academic performance and makes the transition to college easier for students. College students' expectations of themselves, society, parents, and peers can result in academic pressure. Academic pressure can lead to feelings of overwhelming stress and can even reduce their overall academic achievement (Nadeem & Muhammad, 2012). Academic activities and issues include low test scores, numerous tasks, and challenging course material stressors associated with education (Musabi, 2020). According to Musabi (2020), academic activities are the second source of stress in college students' daily lives. 48.7% of respondents claimed that the amount of work students have to do is a significant cause of their academic stress, 9.2% claimed the stress is due to difficulty in understanding the material, 7.9% have trouble with preparing to study, 3.9% of having a full schedule, and 3.9% terrible test scores (Musabi, 2020). It is crucial to

consider that by college students actively experiencing academic pressure it can lead to serious psychological distress.

When students move out to attend college and gain that independence, it can be a stressful transition for some. Without adult supervision, they are beginning to learn how to manage their adult responsibilities in addition to adjusting to the new environment (Bernier et al., 2005). This life transition can influence how college students form their interpersonal relationships. Darling et al. (2007) found that college students who have low levels of social support from parents, poor self-esteem, and low family cohesiveness have been associated with higher levels of depression along with anxiety. Leaving home to attend college creates a sense of homesickness for some students. College students start to experience separation, which generates strong emotional responses (Bernier et al., 2005). Bernier et al. (2005) tested the idea of attachment between parent-student relationships and those students who leave home and found a more negative relationship with the parents when the student leaves home, as well as experiencing more stress. In order to test this idea, *The Adult Attachment Interview* was conducted in order for participants to describe their relationship with their parents when they were younger (Bernier et al., 2005).

Many college students face some level stress and are likely unaware of the coping strategies that can help minimize it. To address the lack of stress management awareness, I created a one-day workshop for college students who are members of the Women's Soccer Club at California State University, Monterey Bay, in Marina, California.

### **Theory**

Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood is a developmental period for those ages 18 to 29. He asserted that this stage is the "in-between" stage for young adults, neither adolescence

nor young adulthood (Munsey, 2006). Arnett constructed this theory as composed of five features that best describe emerging adulthood; the age of identity exploration, the age of instability, the age of self-focus, the age of feeling in between, and the age of possibilities (Munsey, 2006). The age of identity is when college students are trying to figure out who they are, especially regarding their careers and what they want to do after graduation. Emerging adults are making decisions about who they are and what they want to see from their careers, school, and relationships (Munsey, 2006). In the self-focused age, emerging adults are freed from any responsibilities implemented by parents or society. They attempt to decide what they want to do, where they want to go, and who they want to be with (Munsey, 2006). Since many participants live on campus, they are beginning to make independent decisions that will benefit them in their adult life. College students are considered emerging adults because of their independence and ability to figure out what they want for themselves without the influence of others.

### **Consideration of Diversity**

My project will be conducted at California State University, Monterey Bay, in Seaside, California, with Women's Soccer Club members. According to the university's enrollment facts for fall 2022, California State University Monterey Bay is 46% Latino, 29% White, 9% Asian American, 8% two or more races, 3% African American, 4% other/decline 1% Native American, and 1% Pacific Islander. In addition, 62% of students are women, 38% are men, and less than 1% are nonbinary. I anticipate that my participants will not reflect the university's overall population due to gender disparity. Since the soccer club is women-affiliated, it will exclude the male and, perhaps, the nonbinary population, and not all CSUMB students are members of the Women's Soccer Club. Participants' levels of stress may differ due to the number of responsibilities they have. Exercise and athletics may already be healthy coping

strategies for participants, and they may not need additional techniques. The project's content is specific to college students between the ages of 18 to 26. Those who experience stress may differ from those that are older. The content would look different for older and non-college students because their stressors vary in each stage of development. An older adult's stressors could include medical concerns. In addition, content would need to change for younger children due to its complexity. To simplify it for younger participants, I would have made sure to add more interactive elements that would grasp their attention. Younger participants would not fully understand what stress means; I would explain it in a way they would understand.

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the project, participants will be able to...

1. Identify three symptoms of stress.
2. Identify two healthy coping strategies they will use in the future.
3. Indicate two personal stressors.

### **Methods**

I created a one-day workshop for three college students who are members of the Women's Soccer Club at California State University, Monterey Bay, in Marina, California. First, I introduced myself, explained the workshop's purpose, and provided an overview. Then, I asked them, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of 'stress'?". Once we constructed our definition of stress, I delivered a presentation on its symptoms and formal definition, which took about 10 minutes. In the presentation, I also provided three coping scenarios, one was positive and two were negative, and discussed the four types of stressors. See Appendix A for the presentation.

Before starting the topic of healthy coping strategies, I asked participants, “What are ways you cope with stress?”. I wrote their responses on the board. Then, I provided three scenarios where they would identify whether it was positive or negative. Participants constructed a list of healthy ways to cope with negative scenarios as a group. I then displayed a meditation video for 5 minutes and guided them with breathing exercises as the video was playing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTscKfkq4ps>). Then, I led a debrief regarding how they felt throughout this activity. After the debrief, I explained the benefits of meditating and how it helps to manage stress.

Then, I reviewed the four types of stressors with participants; physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral. I then distributed two blank half sheets of paper for participants to write down two personal stressors they are experiencing based on what was previously discussed on both. One-half sheet of paper was given to me, and the other I asked them to rip apart. After this activity, I taught participants the importance of becoming aware of these stressors.

To conclude the presentation, I asked the participants their most significant takeaway from this workshop. Toward the end of the workshop, I reminded participants that this workshop is meant to provide healthy coping strategies for stress. For extra support, I will provide them with resources like the Personal Growth and Counseling Center at California State University, Monterey Bay.

## **Results**

Learning outcome 1 was that participants would indicate three symptoms of stress. In my slide presentation, I presented the common symptoms of stress. After the workshop, I asked participants to write down three symptoms of stress on a piece of paper. All three of my



participants were able to identify three symptoms of stress. See Table 1 for participants' responses. Therefore, I believe that this learning outcome was met.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would identify two healthy coping strategies they would use in the future. To see if participants could identify two healthy coping strategies, I demonstrated three scenarios where participants could identify whether it was a positive or negative way to cope with stress in my slide presentation (See Appendix A). They indicate whether each scenario was positive or negative. For the negative scenarios, as a group, they constructed positive ways to cope with each of those scenarios. I played a 5-minute meditation video and guided them with breathing techniques. Afterward, I led a group discussion where participants constructed a list of healthy coping strategies they would use in the future. I reviewed all the participants' responses as a group. They were able to identify two healthy coping strategies. See Figure 1 for their responses. Therefore, I believe that this learning outcome was met.

Learning outcome 3 was that participants would indicate two personal stressors. In my slide presentation, I reviewed the four types of stressors: physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional. I passed out blank half sheets of paper for each participant to indicate at least two personal stressors. I reviewed all the participants' answers from the half sheets of paper. Participants could indicate two personal stressors, but not the ones I had gone over in my slide presentation. See Table 2 for each participant's responses. Therefore, I believe that this learning outcome was not met.

### **Discussion**

This project was partially successful. The participants could relate relatively to this topic since there were many discussions among one another. Since participants are college students,

they would be considered to be in emerging adulthood. Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood continuously mentions how emerging adults are trying to figure out who they are and what they want without anyone interfering in the process. College students are constantly making decisions regarding relationships, the next steps after graduation and most importantly their future careers. Participants were actively discussing how making these kinds of decisions can be overwhelming and stressful. This project allowed me to guide participants in acknowledging their stressors and to adapt healthy coping strategies to manage them.

In terms of diversity, my project did not include everyone. Since the Women's Soccer Club is predominantly women, it excludes males, those who identify as non-binary, and any other student not a member of the Women's Soccer Club. For this project to be more inclusive, I would offer the workshop to anyone on campus who is a student, regardless of gender. If I had the opportunity to do this project again, I would make sure that the one-day workshop would be open to everyone rather than just having the Women's Soccer Club have a more diverse group of participants. It would give me a better representation of California State University Monterey Bay college students. It was unfortunate that I only had three participants for this project. I would also want to incorporate another interactive activity, such as making stress balls and figuring out how participants could open up more. I believe this workshop allowed participants to become aware of healthy coping strategies they can use whenever stress starts to arise.

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*Table 1**List of participants' responses of symptoms of stress.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Number Correct</b>
1	1. Tension all over the body 2. Irritability 3. Anxiety	3/3
2	1. Memory loss 2. Depression 3. Difficulty concentrating	3/3
3	1. "Fight-or-Flight" 2. Lack of sleep 3. Heart rate increasing	3/3

Table 2

*List of responses of participants' personal stressors.*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Response</b>
1	1. Family 2. School 3. Money 4. Graduation 5. Romantic relationships 6. Friendships after school 7. Death 8. Food 9. Screen time 10. Life after school
2	1. School 2. Work (sometimes) 3. Financial stuff 4. Certain people
3	1. Family 2. School 3. Finances 4. Work

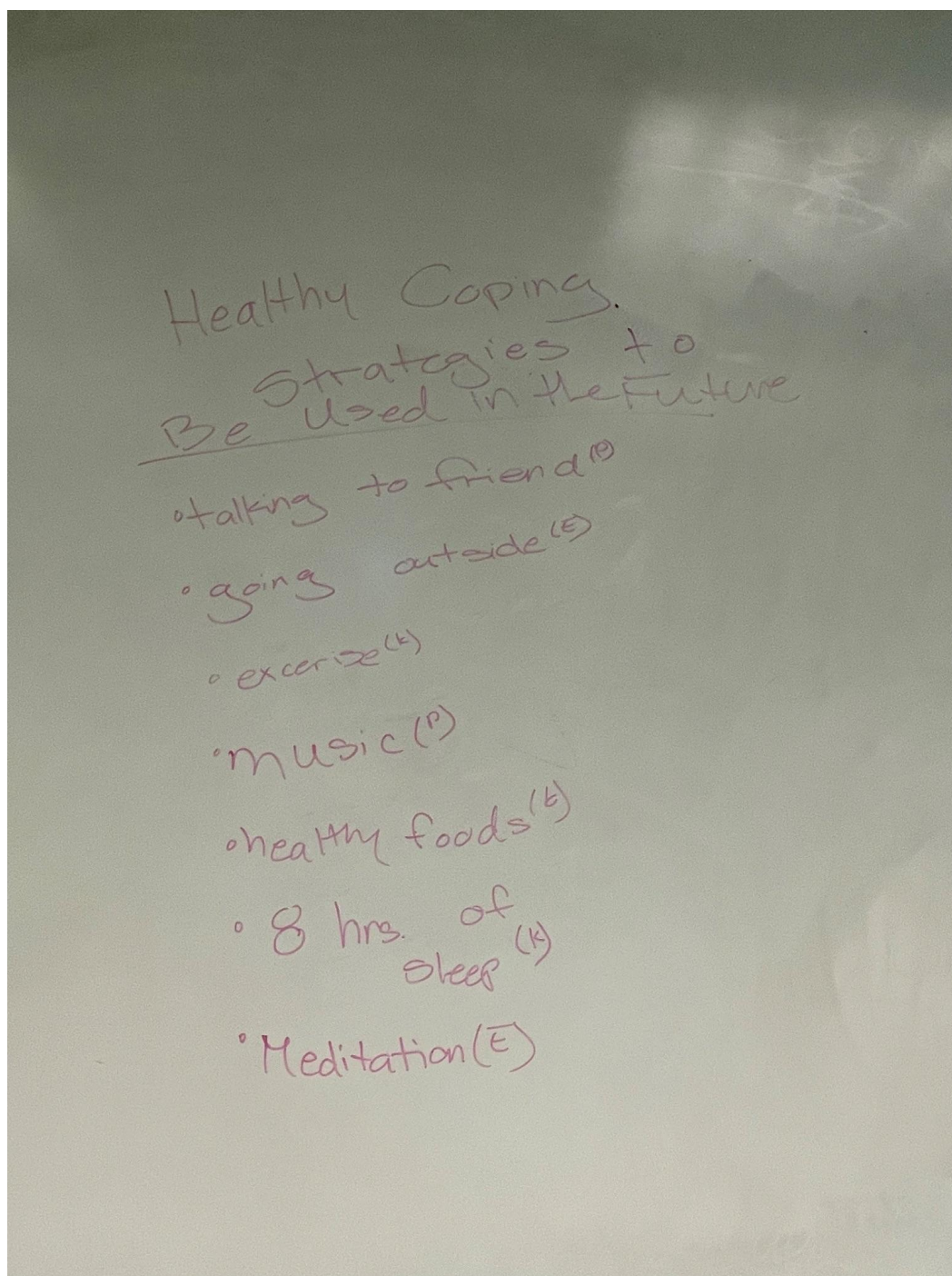
Table 3

*Results of the discussion on the three scenarios of negative and positive healthy coping strategies*

<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Negative or Positive?</b>	<b>Why?</b>	<b>Healthy Ways to Cope</b>
1	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No problems are being solved</li> <li>● Holding in emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communicate the situation with the boss</li> <li>● Take breaks</li> <li>● Seek professional help</li> </ul>
2	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reaching out to a friend rather than holding in feelings</li> <li>● Feeling better</li> </ul>	Healthy
3	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An excuse to take a break</li> <li>● Still feeling anxious</li> <li>● Uses it as a distraction to get her work done.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Set a time to study</li> <li>● Make a list of due dates to prioritize</li> <li>● Take breaks</li> </ul>

Figure 1

Results of the discussion on healthy coping strategies





*Appendix A*

*Powerpoint presentation on healthy coping strategies*



## ***What is Stress?***



- A state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation
- Natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives



## ***Symptoms of Stress***

- Feelings of...
  - Anxiety
  - Fear
  - Sadness
  - Helpless or hopeless
  - Depression
- Having low or no energy
- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people & things
- Worry a lot of the time; feeling guilty but not sure why

## ***Positive vs Negative Coping Strategies***



### ***Scenario #1***

Rebecca is angry about being passed over for a promotion at work. Rather than discussing the situation with her boss and trying to improve her work performance, she holds onto her anger. Rebecca has learned to manage her anger by drinking alcohol. Drinking numbs Rebecca's anger temporarily, but the problems at work remain unresolved.

**Positive or Negative?**

## ***Scenario #2***

Maria is currently a senior at CSUMB. She is experiencing difficulty with turning in her assignments on time as well as working part-time with the Recreation Department. Maria has been feeling overwhelmed for the past couple of weeks. She decides to reach out to her one of her closest friends to express what she is feeling. After the conversation she is feeling much better.

Positive or Negative?

## ***Scenario #3***

Noelle has a research paper due in one of her classes. Because the paper will require so much work, Noelle feels anxious every time she thinks about it. When Noelle distracts herself with other activities, she feels better. Noelle uses the coping strategy of procrastination to avoid her feelings of anxiety. This helps her feel better now, but will cause problems in the long run.

Positive or Negative?

## ***Activity 1: Meditation***

### ***Instructions***

Deep Breathing (5 min)

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTscKfkq4ps)

[JTscKfkq4ps](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTscKfkq4ps)



## ***Activity Debrief***

- How did this activity make you feel?



## ***Why is meditation important?***

- Provides you a sense of calm, peace, and balance
  - Benefits both emotional well-being and overall health
- Used to relax and cope with stress
  - Refocus attention on something calming

## ***Types of Stressors***

### ***Physical***

- Aches & pains
- Increase of heart rate
- Tension throughout your body

### ***Mental***

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Anxiety

### ***Emotional***

- "Fight or flight"
  - Increase agitation or moodiness

### ***Behavioral***

- Change in typical habits
  - Sleeping patterns
  - Isolating yourself

## **Activity 2:** **Personal Stressors**



### **Instructions**

On two half sheet of paper  
write down a at least  
personal stressors

- One will be give to me,  
the other you will rip up

## **Why Become Aware of Stressors?**

- Become aware of what is going on- in your body, mind, and the environment around you
  - What is the source of your stress?
  - What can you do to control it?
  - What do you feel?
  - How do you cope?



## **Resources**



### ***Personal Growth & Counseling Center***

- <https://csumb.edu/pgcc/>



# ***Thanks***

***Do you have any questions?***



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*Appendix B**Presentation from Capstone Festival*

# Increasing College Students' Awareness of Healthy Coping Strategies to Manage Stress

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## Need

- Mental well-being
  - Academic pressure
    - Overwhelmed
    - Reduce academic achievement
- Life Transitions
  - Moving out



## Theory

### Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood

“In-between” stage for young adults, neither adolescence nor young adulthood

- Ages 18 to 29
- The age of identity
- The age of self-focus



## Method



One-day workshop for college students who are member of the Women's Soccer Club at CSUMB.

- 3 participants



## Method

### Powerpoint Presentation:

- Symptoms of stress
- Scenarios on positive and negative ways to cope
- Four types of stressors



## Method



### Five Minute Meditation

- Activity debrief
  - “How did you feel after this activity?”
- Explained the purpose

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of the project, participants will be able to...

**01**

Indicate three  
symptoms of  
stress

**02**

Identify two  
healthy coping  
strategies that  
they will use in  
the future

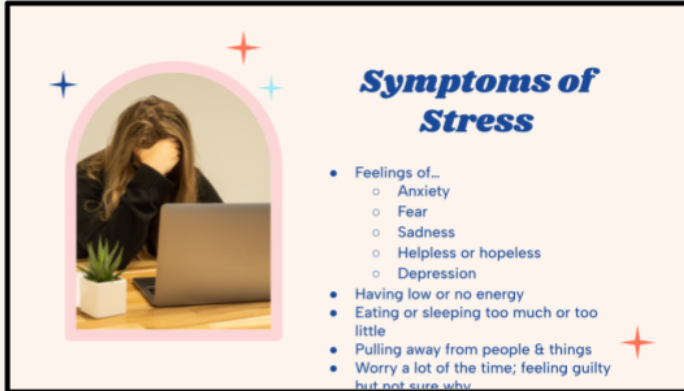
**03**

Indicate two  
personal  
stressors

# Results

## Learning Outcome #1

Indicate three symptoms of stress.



**Symptoms of Stress**

- Feelings of...
  - Anxiety
  - Fear
  - Sadness
  - Helpless or hopeless
  - Depression
- Having low or no energy
- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people & things
- Worry a lot of the time; feeling guilty but not sure why

After the workshop, I asked participants to write down three symptoms of stress on a piece of paper.

## Evidence

Participant	Response	Number Correct
1	1. Tension all over the body 2. Irritability 3. Anxiety	3/3
2	1. Memory loss 2. Depression 3. Difficulty concentrating	3/3
3	1. "Fight-or-Flight" 2. Lack of sleep 3. Heart rate increasing	3/3

Learning Outcome #1:  
Met

## Learning Outcome #2

Identify two healthy coping strategies that they will use in the future.

- Displayed three scenarios on ways to cope with stress
  - One positive, two negative
- Group discussion was led
  - Constructed a list of healthy coping strategies

## Evidence

### ***Scenario #1***

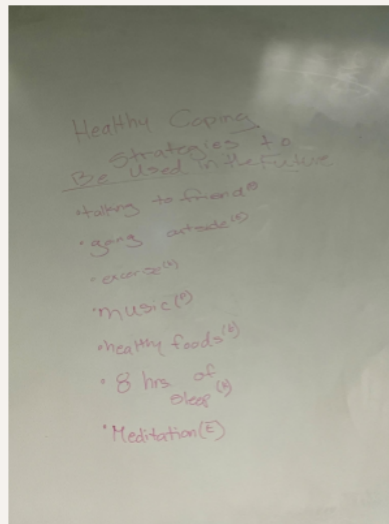
Rebecca is angry about being passed over for a promotion at work. Rather than discussing the situation with her boss and trying to improve her work performance, she holds onto her anger. Rebecca has learned to manage her anger by drinking alcohol. Drinking numbs Rebecca's anger temporarily, but the problems at work remain unresolved.

Positive or Negative?

## Evidence

Scenario	Negative or Positive?	Why?	Healthy Ways to Cope
1	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No problems are being solved</li> <li>• Holding in emotions</li> <li>• Drinking to numb the anger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate the situation with the boss</li> <li>• Take breaks</li> <li>• Seek professional help</li> </ul>

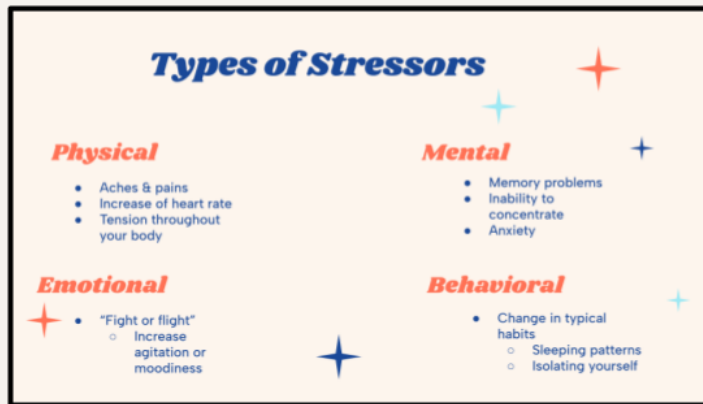
## Evidence



Learning Outcome #1:  
Met

## Learning Outcome #3

Indicate two personal stressors.



- Reviewed the four types of stressors
- Distributed blank half sheets of paper for each participant to indicate at least two personal stressors.

## Evidence

Participants	Response
1	1. Family 2. School 3. Money 4. Graduation
2	1. School 2. Work (sometimes) 3. Financial stuff 4. Certain people
3	1. Family 2. School 3. Finances 4. Work

Learning Outcome #3:  
Not Met ❌



## Discussion

### Was the project successful?

- Partially successful
- Relatable topic
  - Many discussions

### What would I do differently?

- More inclusive
- Incorporate another interactive activity, such as making stress balls.

# Thank you!

## Questions?

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