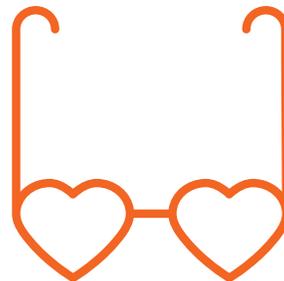


# TOP 10 WAYS TO REDUCE STRESSORS

This handout is designed to move us from theory into practice by giving educators concrete strategies to reduce stressors and create the neurological safety students need in order to learn. When a student's brain perceives threat—whether from noise, unclear expectations, peer conflict, or too many demands—it shifts into survival mode, making learning nearly impossible.

The role of educators, then, is not only to teach content but also to intentionally create conditions where students feel safe enough to take risks, explore, and grow.

Below, are ten practical entry points—from going quiet and offering breaks to showing compassion and reducing inputs. You can use it as a daily reference to scan your classroom, identify where stressors may be hiding, and choose one or two strategies to try right away. By consistently applying even small adjustments, you help lower students' stress responses, strengthen their capacity to engage, and ensure that every child has the foundation of safety necessary for learning and development.



**Go  
Quiet**



approach silently, using non-verbals, limit auditory processing demands

**ASK  
OPEN-ENDED  
QUESTIONS**



skip the directions and corrections, pause between questions, aim to understand their perspective

**Give Visual  
Support**



write, draw, and/or display directions, provide options for capturing thoughts and ideas, make the unpredictable ...predictable

**Offer  
Breaks**



go for a walk, take a breath, sit together, get some water

**Get  
Creative**



play calm music, move, dance, draw, created

## Show Compassion



offer a smile, hug, or a hand

## Reduce the Size of the Group



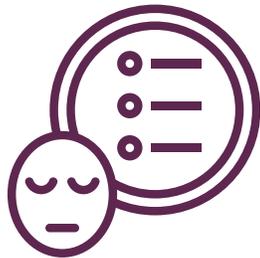
peer partners, stations, co-teach, groups led by paraprofessionals, and specialists

## Reduce Inputs



practice sound minimalism, reduce visual clutter, create physical space between students, use outdoor or other school environments

## Reduce Demands



reduce number of tasks/directions, provide choice for working alone or with a peer, give additional time, provide choice

## Slow Down & Give Time for Processing



count to 3 before repeating, take 2 deep breaths, use a visual, use peer turn and talk

# CHECKLIST OF COMMON STRESSORS

As educators, we know that stress shows up in many different ways—and often in places we don't expect.

This checklist is designed to help you notice and reduce stressors across four domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, and social. Think of it as a tool you can keep handy while planning, teaching, or reflecting on your classroom. Start by scanning each domain and asking: What might be stressing my students right now? Maybe it's the lighting or noise level (biological), the unpredictability of a new routine (emotional), a task that feels overwhelming (cognitive), or the challenge of fitting in with peers (social).

Once you identify a stressor, you can take simple, concrete steps—like adjusting the environment, clarifying directions, or offering a safe space to regroup. The goal isn't to eliminate every stressor, but to notice patterns, respond with care, and create conditions where students feel safe enough to take risks and learn. The more you use the checklist, the more you'll start to see which small changes make the biggest difference for your students.



## BIOLOGICAL DOMAIN

Stress on physiological systems (e.g., cardiovascular, digestive, nervous); It's where stress starts and is always a central factor

- Being too cold or too hot
- Chapped lips/hands
- Eating sugar/candy
- Food intolerance/sensitivities
- Inadequate sleep/disturbed sleep (children 3-5 yrs. need 10-13 hrs. of sleep)
- Limited opportunities to move
- Poor nutrition and/or hydration
- Trouble hearing/seeing
- Being inside too much/limited time outside and/or with nature
- Bright lights, bright colors, busy walls/carpets
- Clothing (sensitivity to fabrics)
- Distractions (e.g., sparkly or dangling things, visually distracting clothes, movement while others are talking, things flashing or hanging from the ceiling, many different things going on, differing demands for attention)
- Deep or light touch
- Dry air
- Fluorescent lighting/lack of natural light
- Having to be too still
- Humming from power lines, from lights, from electronics
- Loud/harsh/disruptive noises (e.g., outside traffic, voices, TV, music, squeaky things, bells, alarms)
- Proximity (too close) and/or difficult to move (too much stuff/too small of space)
- Screen Time (limited movement paired with high sensory stimuli)

### NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:



# EMOTIONAL DOMAIN

Stress caused by strong emotions (positive and negative)

## STRONG FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

- Anticipation
- Build-up to an event or celebration
- Disappointment
- Embarrassment
- Excitement
- Feeling hurt
- Feeling uncertain
- Feeling unwelcome
- Grief/Loss
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Isolation/Separation
- Lonely
- Love/Deep affection
- Sadness/Depression
- Surprise
- Worry

## NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:



# EMOTIONAL DOMAIN

Continued

## FEELING UNSAFE/FEAR

- Anxiety
- Completing certain tasks that are challenging
- Fear of conflict, getting into trouble
- Fear of being made fun of, trying something new
- Fear of \_\_\_\_\_
- Not feeling physically safe
- Participating in a large group
- Uncomfortable with how others are acting
- Being removed from a situation for disciplinary reasons  
(suspension - expulsion)
- Changing routines, situations, expectations
- Confusion
- Overly demanding situations - lots of directions and corrections
- Unclear, inconsistent expectations or messages
- Unfamiliar routines, situations, expectations
- Unpredictable routines, situations, expectations
- Unpreferred routines, situations, expectations
- Unsure what expressions/body language, tone of voice, phrases, and other environmental cues mean

## NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:



## COGNITIVE DOMAIN

Stress caused from processing info; Mental processes involved in knowledge acquisition

- Boring tasks/activities/interactions - lack of stimulation
- Competition
- Confusion - unsure the meaning of things happening or said
- Difficult tasks that are not age appropriate
- Holding information in working memory
- Information overload (too quickly, too slowly)
- Learning a new language - engaged in situations with an unfamiliar language
- Limited opportunities for choice
- Limited opportunities for play
- Making decisions
- Multi-tasking
- New concepts/new learning opportunities
- Overstimulation
- Pattern recognition
- Processing disorder or difficulty
- Prioritizing tasks
- Recall - remembering information
- Symbolic representing
- Thinking - concentrating
- Time pressures
- Too many interruptions
- Lots of requirements to shift their attention on demand
- Lots of distractions (any sensory input)
- Too much inferring vs clearly stating expectations
- Under-stimulation

**NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:**

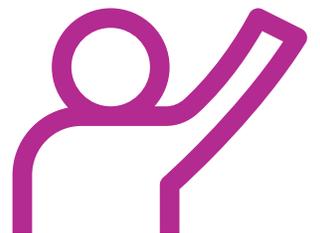


## SOCIAL DOMAIN

### Stress from social interactions with others

- Adjusting to new norm
- Being a quiet person in a loud world
- Being/feeling excluded (pulled out, pulled over, pulled aside)
- Being bossed around or dominated by another - being bullied
- Being left out of a group/rejected
- Big groups - crowded classrooms/settings/spaces
- Confrontation/hostility
- Confusing social situations
- Constant social input (e.g., too much support, lots of reminders, directions, and corrections)
- Fitting into different cultural norms
- Intense one-on-one interaction
- Lack of friends or others to be/play with
- Lack of social engagement
- Large group gatherings
- Learning the norms of a new group
- Not being understood by friends or acquaintances
- Over focus on detecting the social signals
- Reading in front of others
- Two or more people talking at the same time
- Unresponsive adults
- Coping with other people's stress

### NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:



## SOCIAL DOMAIN

Continued

- Dealing with others' strong emotions
- Difficulty reading others' cues
- Empathy
- Helping someone through their distress
- Interacting w/people/groups that don't really 'get you' or are quick to assume
- New neighborhood, classroom, caregiver/teacher
- Other people's discomfort
- Sharing
- Sympathy
- Unfairness
- Understanding right from wrong
- Waiting your turn

**NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:**

