From a TOPSS unit lesson plan on Stress and Health, published by APA in 2023. This activity is intended for teachers for use in their classes. Any further use requires additional APA permission.

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE 1.2

Distress vs Eustress

Stephanie Franks, MS, Berkshire Local Schools, Ohio

CONCEPT

While we often view stress as being negative, Hans Selye coined the term *eustress*. "Eu" is the Greek prefix for good, so eustress means good stress. Selye, Lazarus, and other researchers have suggested that not all stress is negative or has detrimental effects. Eustress is a type of stress, where the demands of a situation cause physiological and cognitive changes that are positive, and allow for optimal levels of performance. The purpose of this activity is to help students gain a better understanding of stress, and how distress and eustress can impact us.

MATERIAL

The *Distress vs Eustress* Worksheet

INSTRUCTIONS

- This activity/discussion will take about 10-15 minutes to complete.
- Ask students the following questions: Is stress always negative? Can stress be positive?
- Introduce the difference between eustress and distress.
  - **Distress:** the negative stress response, often involving negative affect and physiological reactivity: a type of stress that results from being overwhelmed by demands, losses, or perceived threats. Distress triggers physiological changes that can pose serious health risks, especially if combined with maladaptive ways of coping.
  - **Eustress:** the positive stress response, involving optimal levels of stimulation: a type of stress that results from challenging but attainable and enjoyable or worthwhile tasks (e.g., participating in an athletic event, giving a speech). It has a beneficial effect by generating a sense of fulfillment or achievement and facilitating growth, development, mastery, and high levels of performance.

- Have students complete the *Distress vs Eustress* Worksheet.
- Discuss worksheet.
  - Distress is associated with decreased performance, unpleasant feelings, and feelings of anxiety.
  - On the other hand, eustress improves our performance, focuses our attention, motivates us, and is exciting.
  - The stress in situations that are negative and/or difficult to cope with is experienced as distress and the stress (thrill) in situations that are positive and we have the capacity to handle is experienced as eustress.
- Discussion questions for students:
  - When you think of stress, are you typically thinking of distress?
  - Are there some events that will always be negative and others that are positive? Is there some overlap?
  - How could our perception of whether a stressor is positive or negative impact our stress response?
  - How can distress have detrimental effects on you physically and psychologically?
  - How does eustress affect you physically and psychologically?

DISTRESS VS EUSTRESS STUDENT WORKSHEET

Generate a list of examples of when you have experienced distress.

Select one example from the list above.

How did this distress impact you physically and cognitively?

Generate a list of examples of when you have experienced eustress.

Select one example from the list above.

How did this eustress impact you physically and cognitively?