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DeStress for Success: A Stress Management Initiative by Sophie Massé (A), Pierrich Plusquellec (B) & Clément Laporte (C)

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Introduction

Exciting developments in Stress Management Intervention experienced in Montreal, Canada, were presented to the PREPSEC International Symposium held in Fjand, Denmark August 23rd to August 27th, 2014. The following article briefly outlines the information shared with the participants by Sophie Massé of the Centre of Expertise on Delinquency and Behavior Problems (CE|DTC) from the Centre Jeunesse de Montréal – Institut Universitaire (CJM-IU), in Quebec, Canada.

Co-construction: researchers, managers and educators working together

DeStress for Success is a program helping adolescents to identify and manage their stress. Developed by the Centre for Studies on Human Stress (CSHS), in 2011-2012, the program has been adapted and tested with a group of young boys aged 12 to 14 years. All the youth including a comparison group live in group homes of the CJM-IU. The results were surprisingly conclusive.

The pilot project that aimed to adapt, implement and evaluate DeStress for Success at the CJM-IU is an example of practitioners, educators, managers and researchers working together for the benefit of young people and their families. It truly reflects what a word like “*co-construction*” means in an environment like ours. Working together is to witness the efforts made to develop reflective practices where youth care professionals and families enrich each other and enjoy practice. All actors, supported by the Center of Expertise, participated in each stage of the project. All were able to follow the evolution of the pilot project and its results.

The objective of this pilot project was to set the stage in preparation for the application for grants to be able to evaluate the program with a larger number and variety of clients.

Theory and Content of the Program

What is Stress?

What is stress to you? In one study, the most popular definition suggested was “time pressure”! But is that really stress? During the presentations made to the project’s participants (youth and parents), Pierrich Plusquellec and his team presented the following facts to answer this question:

A Response to Stress

Stress was defined by Hans Selye in 1936 as: “a brain response to a threat.” Stress is a normal reaction. When our system encounters a situation it perceives as threatening, it produces a physiological reaction secreting a hormone called CORTISOL, known as the stress hormone, which is responsible for mobilization of energy in the body. It actually prepares the individual to fight or flee the threat! Stress is normal and necessary. The production of cortisol is necessary for the survival of any person.

A Question of Interpretation

ABSOLUTE stress implies that the brain detects a real threat to ALL (earthquake, fire, etc.). RELATIVE stress is the response of the brain that deals with an implied threat, which means that it is only experienced by some people who interpret the situation as threatening. For example, public speaking or parachuting can be stressful for one person and be challenging for others.

EUSTRESS, known as the “good stress”, is the brain's positive response to a stressful situation. DISTRESS, referred to as “bad stress”, is due to the brain’s negative response to a stressful situation.

Chronic Stress

Cortisol production is problematic when stressful situations are experienced chronically. In the long term, the body adapts by either creating a consistently high level of cortisol (the body reaction associated with depression) or a very low level of cortisol production (body reaction associated with burnout).

The Recipe for Stress

In 1968, John Mason discovered that whatever our age and the context in which we find ourselves, our brain interprets a situation as stressful because it detects at least one of the following four challenging ingredients: **N**ovelty, **U**npredictability, **T**hreat to the ego, **S**ense of control (low). The first letters of each ingredient form together the word acronym **NUTS**. A

good way to remember them! Don't let your stress drive you **NUTS!**

Structure of DeStress for Success

The DeStress for Success program includes five workshops, each lasting 50 minutes. They aim to teach teens how to understand and control their stress.

In the first workshop they learn what is stress and the recipe for stress. The week following the first workshop, youth must keep a journal of the situations they identify as stressful. They must also identify which ingredients of the NUTS acronym are present in each of these situations.

In the second workshop, young people learn that stress is a question of interpretation. They are also put in action! In pairs, they prepare a role-play that deals with a situation they find stressful and they practice identifying the NUTS ingredients in the situation. Finally they share the stressful situations they lived during the week and help each other identify the NUTS ingredients. This exercise creates a gold mine of illustrations of different forms of stress!

The third workshop begins with a session of physical exercises in order to observe the reactions of the body. Emphasis is placed on how the body gives us clues to tell us that we are stressed. When stressed, the body creates energy to be ready to flee or to fight the perceived danger. In this workshop, they also look at short-term strategies to let go of the energy build up (related to emotion management strategies).

In the fourth workshop, young people see how to reduce the source of their stress from chronic situations by asking questions like: "How can I reduce the threat to my ego"? "How can I increase my sense of control"?

The last workshop is devoted to identifying those who, in each person's own environment, can serve as social support and conversely those who are likely to add to social pressure. In the following week, the young people themselves will go towards practitioners, teachers, peers, parents, etc. to help those people identify the NUTS ingredients in their stressful situations!

The Pilot Project – Adapting and Evaluating DeStress For Success at CJM-IU

No Achievements Without Partners

The CSHS had previously evaluated its innovative program "DeStress for Success" with more than 1000 school children. It had proven to decrease rates of depression by 10% and to reduce the level of cortisol (stress hormone) by 50% in those most stressed. Assuming troubled youth live with much chronic stress, CSHS was interested in evaluating the program with youth housed within the CJM-IU. In September 2011, the CSHS met with the CJM-IU and it was the beginning of a new partnership.

The aim of the pilot project was to adapt and evaluate the DeStress for Success program with troubled youth. Led by the *Centre of Expertise on Delinquency and Behavior Problems* (CEDTC), this unique project took place in four treatment units of CJM-IU, two units identified as the experimental groups and two others as the comparison groups. This first clinical sample was made up of 32 boys aged 12 to 14 years. The participation of the boys to the workshops and the data collection (saliva collection and questionnaire administration) was highly supported by the educators working in the four residential units. Without their enthusiastic support, the achievement of the research couldn't have been realistic. The CSHS was therefore able to examine the feasibility and appropriateness of the adapted program with the reality of our young teenage boys placed in group homes.

Planning

Identification of participants and coordination of availability of the research team and the field team required proactive planning. Beginning in the summer of 2011, participating teams were confirmed. In September 2011, the calendar included: scheduling presentations of the project to teams, youth and parents; conducting workshops, providing pizza meals as reinforcers and conducting focus groups meetings; even arranging for the collection of the saliva of the participants to analyze the level of cortisol in it, at very specific times of the day; at 7:00 in the morning!

Consent Forms and Adaptation of the Program

To complete the research component, young people and their parents had to sign consent forms to participate in the research. Presentations of the project by the researcher himself to youth and parents facilitated the collection of consents. The "Program Adaptation" committee,

made up of members of the research team and educators of the participating residential units adapted the program to correspond to the youths' reality (cognitive attention, schedules of the group homes, etc.).

Research data and Animation of the Workshops

In order to evaluate the program's impact, the following data was needed: written tests (selective attention, self-esteem, depression and self-perception of stress) and saliva samples (to analyse the cortisol level). Collections were held a week before the start of the program as well as 1 week and 6 weeks after the end of the program. The workshops were conducted in both experimental treatment units in the autumn of 2011 and were repeated in the comparison groups in February 2012. Data was also collected before and after the animation with the comparison groups.

Reinforcers, Follow-Up and Results

At mid-term, a personalized word of encouragement and a small token gift was delivered to participants and teams for their efforts in this project. When pizza meals were offered at the end of the program, young people and practitioners were able to share their ideas for improvement of the program. It was an opportunity for the researcher to transmit preliminary results. The full results were shared with the practitioners in 2012 and 2013 through conference presentations and to youth while presenting them T-shirts and posters displaying the results.

The Results

Results of the evaluation

The results of this pilot project proved to be very promising and surprising with significant results despite the small sample size. The observed significant changes occurred predominantly one month after the program. The self-perceptions of the youth revealed a decreased level of stress, a decreased level of depression, less recognition of expressions of fear, improvement in recognition of expressions of joy, and increased self-esteem.

Some changes in behavior were also reported by some youth and confirmed by the educators working with them. After the 5th workshop, at least one or two boys in each group shared with the group that they realized they were receiving fewer punishments since they put in practice

what they learned. Using alternative ways to let go of the energy built up by stress and resolving problems, understood by examining the ingredients of stress (NUTS) in their experiences, had effectively help them to put constructive solutions in place.

Ongoing developments

Animation and development Still Continues

Since 2012, the program is still bustling with young people in the residential units that participated in the evaluation. The project was adapted for youth 15-17 years old and for youth 10-13 years old housed in youth reception centers. In November 2014, 90 educators from the sectors who had participated in the projects were trained to be trainers and implement the program with other youth.

Evaluation of Stress & Compagnie, A Program for Educators

From 2013 to the end of 2014, a program inspired by DeStress for Success was adapted on the web, offered to educators working with youth in custody and evaluated with a sample of 80 educators. Results will become available in 2015.

Integration of DeStress for Success and Stress & Compagnie in a Project Targeting Runaways

Since 2013 both programs were implemented in the 4 residential units of boys at the “Centre Jeunesse de Montréal-Institut Universitaire” that participate in a project concerning runaways (you may consult the web site at cedtc.cjm-iu.qc.ca).

A Grant Application has been submitted for a larger Evaluation of the Program

In October 2014 grant applications were submitted to secure funding for evaluation of the programs DeStress for Success and Stress & Company for a greater number of clients and educators of the CJM-IU.

Development of Anglophone & International Partnerships.

In 2014, in order to respond to marked interest by various organizations, the CSHS and CEDTC are developing partnerships to pursue the training of youth care professionals for the animation of the DeStress for Success programs for troubled youth using the English

language.

The pilot project received two awards of excellence in 2012 and one nomination for best practice in 2014.

Award of Excellence – Innovative Practices

In June 2012, the “**Multidisciplinary Council of the Centre Jeunesse de Montréal-Institut Universitaire**” gave the *Innovative Practice Award of 2012* to the evaluation project of the program DeStress for Success adapted for youth in group homes.

Award of Excellence for Research and Programs.

In October 2012 the **The Child Welfare League of Canada** presented the award for *Research and Program Excellence 2012* to Sophie Massé (CJM-IU) and Pierrich Plusquellec, (CESH) for the evaluation of DeStress for Success adapted for youth in group homes.

Nomination for the Canadian Best Practices Portal.

In November 2014, the Program “DeStress for Success” was nominated as “Best Practice” by **The Public Health Agency of Canada.**

For more information

à Youtube documentary video (french) : **Spin ton stress**

à Youtube video (french): **Résultats et retombées du projet pilote Désstress et**

Progresse

à Website (click English) : **stresshumain.ca**

à Website (French): **cedtc.cjm-iu.qc.ca**