

The Stress bucket

What is it?

Pupils on the autism spectrum experience high levels of stress and anxiety. The level of stress, the causes, and the ability to cope with it will vary from individual to individual, day to day and context. The stress bucket is a way of supporting pupils to begin to recognize when they are feeling stressed and identify the factors which might contribute to that.

When would you use it?

For pupils who are clearly struggling with stress and anxiety, but who are not necessarily able to recognise or articulate that. Typically such pupils may appear to go from a low level of arousal to a state of high arousal with possible loss of control, in a relatively short time and in response to what to others might appear to be a relatively minor trigger.

This tool could be used in conjunction with

- The 5 to 1
- How do I feel? (volcano)
- Emotion thermometer
- How fast does your engine run?

How to use it

You will need a bucket, water and a selection of waterproof containers for this activity. The aim of this activity is to get the bucket to overflow, so ensure that the containers picked have sufficient capacity to do so, assuming at least 3 or 4 are used. The bucket should be of a size such that when it is full of water it will be hard for the pupil to lift up and carry.

- Look at the diagram of the stress bucket, and the labels which are attached to it.
- Now work with the pupil to begin to identify the triggers or factors which contribute to their stress.
- Each time you identify a trigger, label a waterproof container accordingly.
- Once you have identified all the triggers, fill the containers up with water.
- Ask the pupil to tip the containers into the bucket one at a time. You might ask them to pick the container which is labelled by a trigger which causes them problems most often.
- The bucket will become very heavy, and may overflow.
- Make sure the pupil has a chance to lift the bucket so s/he gets a sense of what a weight it is.
- Ask the pupil 'How would you make it less heavy, how would you empty that bucket? The child will probably reply 'tip it out'. Get them to do this, ideally in several 'tips' and discuss how much easier the bucket is to carry when it gets less heavy.
- Now talk to the child about how s/he might empty 'some of the water' (stress) in his or her bucket.

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- It is important to recognise that the amount of stress each of us can cope with varies from day to day and situation to situation. Sometimes we can cope with a lot of stress before our bucket is overflowing, other days we only have a small bucket (a thimble). Look at the diagram which shows the different sized container (how big is your bucket) or ideally compare the size of a range of containers e.g. a thimble, a cup, a mug, a small jug, a large jug and a bucket.
- Work with the pupil to understand how their ability to cope may vary from day to day and to consider some of the factors which might influence this. These may include:
 - Experiences prior to involvement at school (e.g. if you over sleep, miss the bus or the taxi doesn't turn up)
 - How you are feeling (if you are feeling sick, have tummy ache or a headache)
 - Memory – previous influences – maybe you had a bad day last time you were taught by Mr X and so when you come into school you are worried it will happen again.
 - What you will be doing /activity planned. How do you feel if you know that you are going to be doing something that you either don't like or find hard?
 - Communication skills – how do you feel when you find it hard to either understand what is being said to you, or to tell someone else how you are feeling or what you want?
 - Who you will be working with -Pupils & staff involved in the activity – talk to the pupil about pupils and staff they like, and others they find harder to work with. How do they feel when they are having a lesson with people they find it hard to get on with?
 - Plus many other abstract influences – can the pupil think of any?