The Development, Implementation, and Assessment of a Stress Management Group Counseling Curriculum for Gifted Middle School Students

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Abstract

Gifted students are a special population that is often forgotten about (Wood & Peterson, 2018). They are a diverse group of students with very unique needs. School counselors and other educators must develop their knowledge and skills for working this group. Although it may seem like they are capable of handling the academic rigor and stress associated with being part of a gifted program, this may not be the case. Research has shown that they are just as likely to have mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, etc.) as their peers (Wood & Peterson, 2018; Moon, 2009). Gifted students may experience asynchronous development meaning that they are more advanced cognitively, however, their social/emotional development often does not occur at the same pace (Colangelo & Wood, 2015; Wood & Peterson, 2018). These developmental differences can lead to mental health issues as well as difficulty with peer relationships (Allen, 2017). In addition, gifted students are often held to incredibly high standards and may struggle with perfectionism (Chan, 2007; Bailey, 2007). The purpose of the current study is to determine how participating in a group counseling intervention involving mindfulness and Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) techniques impacts gifted students’ preferred coping styles. This researcher hypothesized that this intervention would lead students to use more task-oriented coping strategies while using emotion-oriented coping less often. The results indicated that there was a significant change in task-oriented coping. Implications and recommendations for professional school counselors and counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords: Gifted students, asynchronous development, stress and anxiety, perfectionism, CBT, group counseling, coping styles
The Development, Implementation, and Assessment of a Stress Management Group

Counseling Curriculum for Gifted Middle School Students

Parents and educators may assume gifted students are easily able to navigate life’s challenges and that they do not need additional support, however, this is simply not true. For instance, Hyatt (2010) conducted a case study on a gifted adolescent whom she gave the pseudonym, Amber. Amber had an IQ of 140, participated in gifted and talented coursework, and her senior class even voted her “Most Intelligent”. Despite being incredibly smart, she experienced a great deal of hardship. She sometimes exhibited poor behavior and reported she felt misunderstood. She shared she often felt lonely and depressed and had endured bullying for quite a long time. At the age of 18, she died by suicide. This is just one example of why it is crucial that educators, especially school counselors, are aware of the needs of gifted individuals. Like other students, they may need intentional social-emotional support.

First, it is important for educators to identify gifted students. One major challenge in research involving this population is defining what it means to be gifted. However, the National Association for Gifted Children (2010, para 1) states that…

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2013), school districts often use several measures to determine eligibility for gifted and talented programming such as
students’ IQ, grade point average (GPA), scores on achievement tests, and teacher ratings (as cited in Colangelo & Wood, 2014).

In addition to identifying gifted students, it is also important to recognize the needs of gifted students. For example, gifted students are just as likely to experience anxiety, depression, the effects of parental separation or divorce, grief, substance use, abuse and neglect, etc. as their peers (Moon, 2009; Wood & Peterson, 2018; Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012). Unfortunately, educators may be unaware, and therefore neglect the needs of gifted students. In this thesis, literature describing myths of the gifted population and the diversity among students in gifted and talented programs will be addressed. Furthermore, this review of literature will also focus on asynchronous development, peer relationships, and mental health concerns of gifted students.

Additionally, this thesis will describe a group counseling intervention specifically aimed to help gifted students cope with stress and anxiety. The current literature on the gifted population is lacking research on specific interventions for promoting the emotional well-being of gifted students. Particularly, there has also been little research investigating the coping style of gifted students. Thus, this study will begin to address this topic. In an attempt to help gifted middle school students develop healthy coping skills, this small group intervention utilized psychoeducation and cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques. Participants completed an assessment before and after the intervention to determine if their coping style changed. The findings of this research demonstrated that the proposed curriculum significantly increased group members’ task-oriented coping which is promising for their overall well-being. Finally, implications for teachers, school counselors, and parents of gifted students are discussed.

**Literature Review**
Misconceptions of the Gifted Population

There are many myths regarding the gifted population that researchers have been working to dispel. For instance, according to Moon (2009), many assume that gifted individuals do not experience struggles and that they are somehow “immune to boredom, stress, depression, or confusion” (Wood, 2006, p. 9). Educators often assume that they do not need help because they think they understand the material and get support elsewhere (Wood & Peterson, 2018). Peterson (2009) argues that this misconception can make it seem as though counselors do not need to be prepared to work with gifted clients or students. However, Allen (2017) believes that if the counseling profession “broadened multicultural counseling to include additional factors such as ability, then the gifted and talented become a special population within the field of counseling, and one that is deserving of counselors’ awareness and perhaps a differentiated skill set” (p. 136).

Sometimes, others invalidate one’s giftedness by claiming that everyone has a gift or some quality that makes them special (Wood & Peterson, 2018). Another commonly held belief is that gifted individuals’ extraordinary abilities are a gift and that they did not have to work for it; it just comes naturally to them, therefore, they should not be praised for it (Thompson, 1998 as cited Wood & Peterson, 2018). Thompson (1998) states that much of our society does not value intellectual giftedness. Colangelo (2009) believes giftedness is devalued because anti-intellectualism is commonly accepted in the United States (as cited in Wood & Peterson, 2018). The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1993) argues that “a distrust of the intellect and an assumption that people should be allowed to develop to their full potential” (p. 13) has gotten in the way of giving gifted individuals the best possible education (as cited in Wood & Peterson, p. 3).
Diversity and Equity in Gifted and Talented Programs

Traditionally, gifted individuals fit the following description: well-behaved, White, upper-middle or middle-class individuals with high grade point averages (Reis & Renzulli, 2009 as cited in Wood & Peterson, 2018). They are usually members of a “traditional nuclear family” that is financially stable. Although some gifted students seem to fit this stereotype, many do not (Allen, 2017, p. 134). The process for identifying gifted individuals in the past has discriminated against diverse populations. Robinson (2008) states that gifted individuals are “as diverse as any group one can find – diverse in ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and experiences, diverse in family composition and family dynamics, and diverse in aptitudes and creativity” (p. 33). Gifted students are of numerous racial and ethnic backgrounds, different family structures, experience economic hardship, and may be members of the LGBTQ community (Allen, 2017; Wood & Peterson, 2018). Contrary to popular belief, gifted individuals can also have disabilities such as ADHD or autism spectrum disorder (Foley-Nicpon & Assouline, 2015; Allen, 2017) as well as have academic struggles or be underachieving students (Seigle, McCoach, & Rubenstein, 2012 as cited in Allen, 2017).

Researchers have found disparities among racial groups within the gifted population despite efforts by educators to decrease the achievement gap between these diverse groups. In particular, African American and Hispanic students are underrepresented even for schools in which they make up a large proportion of the student population overall (Ford, 2014). Ford (2014) believes that “they are stifled by society’s deeply ingrained bias of equating Whites and whiteness with superiority” (p.150). Black males are the least likely to be selected for gifted programs and much of the focus in regard to this population is on their limitations, barriers, negative labels, etc. (Ford, 2010 as cited in Henfield, 2013). Many of their experiences as young
Black men such as issues of masculinity and other personal stressors (e.g., home environment) prevent their ability to perform well in school. School counselors are in the position to address any barriers and help all students, including Black males, reach their highest potential. Ford (2014) presents a list of questions and recommendations educators should consider to make gifted programs more equitable. Henfield (2013) suggested educators’ focus on ensuring all students meet minimum standards of achievement may lessen their focus on high achieving students, underscoring the possibility that a gap in intentional support of this population exists.

**Asynchronous Development and Peer Relationships**

Many researchers agree that gifted individuals experience the world much differently than their peers (Cross & Cross, 2014). Their differences can impact their interactions with others. According to Silverman (2002), gifted students are more advanced in their cognitive development compared to their same-age peers. This discrepancy is known as asynchronous development (as cited in Colangelo & Wood, 2015). As a result, they may have difficulty fitting in (Colangelo & Wood, 2015; Allen, 2017; Wood & Peterson, 2018). Some studies have suggested that young, gifted boys were well-liked by their classmates, but female students were not (Cross & Cross, 2014). But, as students develop, their giftedness may become more of a concern in terms of peer relationships. Robinson (2008) states that in early adolescence, gifted students have a strong desire to fit in, however, because of their differences, they struggle to connect with their peers. They may feel lonely because they are unable to find friends who are similar to them cognitively, or they may attempt to befriend older students. They may also seem reserved or standoffish in social situations and when bored in school, which many gifted students experience, they may become frustrated and short-tempered with their classmates.
Gifted students’ peer relationships can also influence their academic performance. They may be subject to “threatening upward comparison”, meaning that they are seen as better or smarter than others which may lead them to change their behavior and begin to perform at a lower level in an attempt to lessen the perceived threat they pose to their peers (Cross & Cross, 2014, p. 164). According to Grobman (2009), gifted individuals are often conscious of how their success impacts those around them; they believe that their achievements came at the expense of others and this would embarrass their classmates (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2014). Berndt (1999) states that they may underperform “in order to satisfy the need for belonging” (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2014, p. 162). This stigma surrounding being gifted and the tendency to perform worse than they are capable has been found in most cultures (Cross et al., 2019).

Asynchronous development can also involve incongruity between one’s own cognitive and social/emotional maturation (Wood & Peterson, 2018). Despite being cognitively advanced, gifted students still tend to develop socially and emotionally commensurate with their peers; however, the differences between their cognitive development versus their social-emotional development may cause an advanced understanding of the world around them, while not having the social-emotional maturity to cope with this higher level of understanding. This can make it hard for gifted students to cope, and for their peers to lack understanding regarding their concerns, which may cause their classmates to dismiss them (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007 as cited in Cross & Cross, 2015). Gifted students may experience isolation and feel ostracized which can be detrimental to their mental health (Cross & Cross, 2015).

Bullying is a common issue that gifted adolescents face (Allen, 2017). In fact, studies have demonstrated that gifted students tend to be victims of bullying more often than their peers (Allen, 2017). Bullying is an act that involves a power differential that is intended to hurt another
individual and is repeated (“What is Bullying”, 2020). Researchers have found that bullying can become a barrier to learning and lead to lower self-esteem, school refusal, higher levels of anxiety and depression (Allen, 2017), and in extreme cases like Amber’s, suicide (Hyatt, 2010). In research conducted by Peterson and Ray (2006), 67% of gifted students reported having been mistreated or teased by their peers at least once over the course of the year and this seems to be most prevalent in 7th and 8th grade (as cited in Allen, 2017). Because gifted students tend to have intense emotions, Allen (2017) argues that this may “result in continual psychological reexperiencing of ill treatment and even thoughts of suicide” (p. 270-271).

In order to cope with differences between them and their classmates, gifted students may “hide their giftedness” (Cross et al., 2019, p. 232). They may avoid participating in class and talking about grades or may even choose to be dishonest when asked by other students about their scores. Another way gifted students may deal with social comparison is by conforming to be more similar to the average student. In an effort to control how others view them, gifted students may perform at a lower level, pretend to be interested in the same things as their peers, or stay silent when they do not agree with a classmate. Some gifted students may choose to use their giftedness to help their peers understand concepts in class. Sometimes peer support can be a good strategy for reducing strain between them and their peers, but some gifted students perceive this as an additional responsibility that could add to their stress (Cross, et al., 2019). The final coping behavior that some gifted students partake in is called self-focus. In this case, students try not to compare themselves to others and concentrate on doing their best. These are all ways gifted individuals may deal with issues involving their classmates.

**Mental Health of Gifted Students**
There has been much debate over how being gifted influences individuals’ psychological well-being and research has provided contradictory information. Most of the research seems to suggest that gifted students do not experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts at higher rates than their peers (Cross & Cross, 2015). However, it is important to note that the average student may not have as much pressure to perform at a high standard, be compared to others in a way that makes them feel bad for being successful, and not feeling accepted by their classmates due to their cognitive ability (Cross & Cross, 2015).

**Anxiety.**

Although there is little evidence to suggest that gifted individuals are more likely to suffer from anxiety, some researchers believe that their perfectionistic tendencies, asynchronous development, and emotional sensitivity may be considered risk factors for mental health issues (Cross & Cross, 2015). Unsurprisingly, gifted students often experience high expectations from others and themselves. Trying to meet these expectations may lead to increased stress and anxiety. In addition, Peterson (2012) states that they often feel like they must continue to meet certain standards set by their own previous performance (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2015).

This need to meet high expectations, coupled with the fear of making others feel inferior and wanting to fit in can put these students in a very uncomfortable position. Gifted students can also be self-critical and avoid taking risks and talking about their problems (Wood & Peterson, 2018). According to Peterson et al. (2009), these students also tend to be involved in too many activities which often adds to their stress (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2015). Because they are often seen as more mature as a result of their increased cognitive ability, gifted students may also be given “adult type responsibilities” which may elicit feelings of anxiousness (Wood &
Peterson, 2018, p. 34). Lastly, perfectionism is a major contributor to gifted students’ anxiety which will be addressed below.

**Depression and Suicidal Ideation.**

Depression and anxiety are closely linked and often co-occurring. “Anxiety may provoke avoidance behaviors through anticipated fear, whereas depression may result in an inability to engage or disinterest in activities” (Cross & Cross, 2015, p. 167). In both of these instances, the behavior may appear the same, as avoidance, however, the cause may be different. Many of the issues discussed previously can influence one’s mental health. Gifted individuals may feel like others do not understand them and they are getting contradictory messages from the people around them. On the one-hand, they strive to meet high expectations set for them, but on the other, they struggle to connect with peers and may be afraid of how their success will impact others which may lead to underperformance.

In research conducted by Kanevsky and Keighley (2003), “gifted students who dropped out of high school were responding to a hopeless situation in which schools were simply not meeting their needs for challenge, choice, complexity, control, and caring teachers; their intentional underachievement may have saved them from depression” (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2015, p. 167). This suggests that gifted students may use avoidance as a coping mechanism. In situations where students do not have a lot of control and cannot change the environment around them, they may begin to feel helpless or experience depression.

It is evident by Amber’s story that there have been gifted individuals who have died by suicide. However, the frequency of this issue among gifted individuals has not been recorded (Cross & Cross, 2015). Perhaps this is because it has been difficult to come to an agreement on
the definition of gifted, so consistent identification of gifted individual has been problematic. Despite not having empirical evidence, some researchers argue that certain qualities that gifted students often have such as perfectionism, oversensitivity, and isolation may be connected to suicidal ideation and attempts. Although research has indicated that gifted students are not any more likely to experience suicidal ideation, researchers worry that they may be more successful in completing suicide. For instance, Cross et al. (1996; 2002) and Hyatt (2010) examined autopsies of gifted individuals who died by suicide and found that three of five individuals passed away after their first attempt (as cited in Cross & Cross, 2015).

**Perfectionism**

A perfectionist is someone who strives to meet incredibly high standards. This is not inherently problematic; it can motivate individuals to work hard and do their best, however, it may also have adverse effects on their overall wellbeing (James & Rimes, 2017). According to Curran and Hill (2019), perfectionism has become more common over time and they argue that this is due to “young people now facing more competitive environments, more unrealistic expectations, and more anxious and controlling parents than generations before” (p. 421). Whether a student struggles with unhealthy perfectionism can be a determining factor in their mental health.

Grzegorek et al. (2004) states that about two-thirds of all people, not just those who are gifted, are considered perfectionists and more than 25% of people are maladaptive perfectionists (as cited in James & Rimes, 2017). Adaptive perfectionists set high standards for themselves which motivates them to do well while maladaptive perfectionism causes an individual to be afraid of making mistakes and unnecessarily critical of themselves. This can impede their ability to be a successful student and many researchers have found that maladaptive perfectionism can
cause psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, (Ferrari, Yap, Scott, Einstein, & Ciarrochi, 2018; James & Rimes, 2017; Noble, Ashby, & Gnillka, 2014) and reduced life satisfaction (Ashby, Noble, & Gnilka, 2012).

Gifted students have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to perfectionism. Chan (2007) states that perfectionism is a characteristic often associated with gifted students (also see Bailey, 2007). Siegle and Schuler (2000) found rises in perfectionism for gifted individuals during early adolescence, specifically for middle school girls (as cited in Allen, 2017). There has been some research that indicates that gifted students tend to experience higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to their peers (Haberlin, 2015). Those who experience maladaptive perfectionism may have difficulty being successful students, as the levels of stress associated with this trait can cause forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that perfectionism, specifically the maladaptive subtype, has many negative effects on individuals. A study conducted by Mofield and Peters (2015), showed that while not all gifted adolescents experience maladaptive perfectionism, many do. Fear of failure and making mistakes is often an issue for these individuals and they may feel as though their self-worth is dependent on their academic performance (Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012). They may struggle with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, yet they usually will not seek help (Wood & Peterson, 2018). This is true of perfectionists too; they have been found to be less likely to pursue psychological help such as counseling (Abdollahi, Hosseinian, Beh-Pajooh, & Carlbring, 2017). According to Jackson and Peterson (2003), gifted students avoid discussing mental health concerns with others because they are afraid that this will negatively impact those they confide in (as cited in Wood & Peterson, 2018).
Researchers have also found that avoidant strategies for coping with stress are associated with the manifestation of maladaptive perfectionism (Noble, Ashby, & Gnillka, 2014). Therefore, perfectionistic students may need assistance developing the skills to cope with stressors in a healthy manner. It is important for the professional school counselor to be aware of this consideration and provide social/emotional support for these students. The mental health concerns and avoidant coping strategies that have been found to be associated with maladaptive perfectionism may suggest a need for school counselors to be proactive and implement early interventions with a specific focus on the gifted population.

**Counseling Gifted Students**

Currently, the U.S. federal government does not mandate states to discern gifted students from the general population, deliver specific instruction, or provide services for them. Furthermore, it does not assist school districts in doing so (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013, as cited in Allen, 2017). Researchers have found that teachers are often the ones that meet both their academic and social/emotional needs of gifted students as they spend the most time with them and understand their needs (Croft, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 1991 as cited in Allen, 2017). However, it is also the responsibility of the professional school counselor to meet the needs of the gifted population, as school counselors are expected to work with all students (ASCA, 2019).

The American School Counselor Association (2019) states that “school counselors advocate for the inclusion of, and the participation in, activities that effectively address the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of gifted and talented students at all academic levels” (p. 32). They help to ensure that these students are challenged and that their needs are being met at school. School counselors must work to address specific struggles gifted individuals
face such as anxiety and stress management, perfectionism, meeting expectations, depression, underachievement, issues with peers, and much more. As mentioned previously, gifted students may not reach out for help regarding mental health concerns (Wood & Peterson, 2018), so school counselors need to be vigilant in looking for signs that they are struggling.

*Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.*

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for a variety of mental illnesses with the goal of therapy focusing on changing one’s thought and behavior patterns as well as developing healthy coping skills to address the presenting issues (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017; Seligman, & Ollendick, 2011). Cognitive behavioral therapy is an evidence-based practice that is directive in nature and is effective in treating anxiety disorders in children and adolescents (Seligman, & Ollendick, 2011). Hollon and Beck (1994) suggest that addressing a person’s beliefs and cognitive distortions regarding a perceived threat is helpful in reducing anxiety symptoms (as cited in Sharf, 2008). Seligman and Ollendick (2011) state that roughly two-thirds of children are able to do away with their diagnosis following this treatment. A meta-analysis of several treatments for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents was conducted by Zhou et al. (2019) using data from clinical trials found in various databases. In this study, researchers investigated different formats including Behavioral Therapy (BT) and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for both individuals and groups, as well as Bibliotherapy. The impact of parental involvement in therapy sessions was also explored. All of these conditions were compared to different control groups. The researchers found that BT and CBT were both helpful in reducing anxiety symptoms, however, group CBT was the most effective for children and adolescents with anxiety disorders when following up after the
completion of the treatment. These findings suggest that counselors may want to consider group CBT first when treating children and adolescents with anxiety.

**Mindfulness.**

Mindfulness is another component of the group counseling curriculum presented in this research. This is the practice of bringing awareness to the present moment; focusing on the here and now (Halland, et al., 2015; Sharf, 2008). One study investigated how participating in a 7-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program impacted the way college students, particularly psychology and medical students, coped with stress (Halland, et al., 2015). Researchers discovered that students who were involved in this intervention were more likely to engage in coping strategies that involved problem-solving. This means that they were more likely to take an active role in lessening their stress. This is similar to the task-oriented coping style discussed in the current research. Halland and his colleagues (2015) were incorrect in their prediction that this training would reduce disengagement coping techniques such as avoidance, self-blame, and wishful thinking among students. However, those who demonstrated higher levels of neuroticism on the Basic Character Inventory (BCI) were more likely to reach out for social support and less likely to use disengagement coping strategies following the completion of the mindfulness intervention (Halland, et al., 2015). This demonstrates that mindfulness may be particularly beneficial for people with this personality trait. In working with children and adolescents in a residential psychiatric treatment facility, researchers have found that mindfulness practices decrease ratings of internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression while promoting the development of adaptive skills (Vorha, et al., 2019). There has been little evidence to suggest that this intervention increases mindfulness skills or participants’ perceived stress levels. However, the patients who participated in the mindfulness-based stress reduction
program during treatment had significantly shorter stays than those who did not participate (Vorha, et al., 2019). The implications of this using this skill for gifted students is unknown, yet it does show promise for decreasing internalizing issues and increasing adaptive coping which is aligned with this research study.

**Adult Support.**

As discussed earlier, gifted individuals are less likely to reach out when in need of psychological help (Abdollahi, Hosseinian, Beh-Pajooh, & Carlbring, 2017). Because of the high expectations others have for them and they hold for themselves, they may be afraid or embarrassed to ask for academic help as well; they feel like they should be able to get it on their own without extra support because they are gifted. Certain individuals may be more apprehensive than others when it comes to asking for help. For instance, males struggle with seeking help from others. From a very young age, males in particular have been socialized to avoid seeking help from others (Courtenay, 2000 as cited in Henfield, 2013).

Having social support and positive adult relationships is important in developing coping skills and using them effectively (Reife, Duffy, & Grant, 2020). In a study conducted on youth in a low-income, urban setting, researchers found that the use of helpful coping skills is mediated by adult support. For youth who had adults support them in their development and use of coping strategies, self-soothing, expressing oneself, and seeking help and safety were viewed as protective factors and lessened psychological symptoms resulting from stressful situations for these participants. Use of self-care, distraction, and problem-solving were identified as positive coping techniques by those who did not have supportive adults, however, they were not actually helpful in reducing psychological symptoms due to stress. Avoidance coping strategies were the only ones that demonstrated a positive impact on youth without adult support. This shows that is
necessary for children and adolescents to have adult support in order to use a variety of effective coping techniques (Reife, Duffy, & Grant, 2020).

**Group Counseling.**

One way school counselors can assist gifted learners is to invite them to participate in group counseling. Mayes et al. (2016) suggest group counseling for gifted students as it can “normalize their challenges, help them embrace their identities, and provide peer support,” as well as teach them how to advocate for themselves and how to cope in a healthy manner (as cited in Wood & Peterson, 2018, p. 54). Further, group counseling can provide opportunity for skill development, such as the development of coping skills and social skills, as well increased self-awareness.

**Psychoeducational group counseling.** In addition to skill development, group counseling offer opportunities to integrate psychoeducation. Psychoeducational groups often center around group members affect, cognitions, and behaviors (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). The purpose of these groups is to bring awareness to an issue in individuals’ lives and help them develop knowledge and skills to overcome the problem. Various exercises, homework assignments, and readings are often incorporated in psychoeducational groups. These types of groups are helpful for many problems a person may encounter in their life. Some common topics discussed in psychoeducational groups are social skills, friendship, bullying prevention, substance abuse, anger management, and stress management (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). The psychoeducational methods in the current research is designed to inform students about the parts of the brain associated with stress and anxiety as well as help them develop healthy coping skills.
Thus, the following study focuses on the integration of the aforementioned research-based interventions of CBT, mindfulness, psychoeducation and adult support into the curriculum for a group counseling intervention for gifted students. This intervention was delivered by a school counselor-in-training under university and site supervision using the following methods and procedures.

**Method**

This study received IRB approval from the university where the researcher was enrolled in a Master’s counseling program and was conducted under the supervision of a university faculty member.

**Participants**

After receiving IRB approval, all students in the gifted and talented program in a suburban middle school in Wisconsin were offered the opportunity to participate in the group counseling program. Admittance into the gifted and talented program within this particular school district involves multiple means of assessment including standardized test data, teacher nominations, and GPA. Participation in the group counseling intervention and research study was completely voluntary. Students who completed both the pre- and post-tests while participating in the stress and anxiety management small group were included in this study. It is important to note there were additional students who participated in the small group intervention but were not a part of this research study. Thus, this study involved a small sample of 10 students within the gifted and talented program. Participants were placed in small group interventions based on their grade level. Of those participating in the study, 50% of students were in 6th grade, 20% were in 7th grade, and 30% were in 8th grade. They ranged in age from 11 to 14 with a mean age of 12.01.
The majority of the participants identified as female (60%), three were male (30%), and one individual identified as gender fluid and biologically female (10%). Nearly all of participants identified as White/Caucasian (90%); one participant reported that they were unsure of their race (10%).

Measures

**Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations.** In this study, participants completed the adolescent version of the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS; Endler & Parker, 1999) to determine how they deal with stress and if this changed after participating in a small group intervention. According to a review by Tirre (2003), the CISS is an assessment based on theory that has been shown to have sound psychometric properties. Tirre discussed evidence to suggest that the CISS demonstrated satisfactory levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. When compared to other similar assessments, the CISS showed strong construct validity in both the adult and adolescent versions.

This instrument is a 48-item self-report which was completed and scored by hand. Subjects responded to statement using a 5-point Likert scale based on how often they use the coping skill, 1 being *Not at All* and 5 being *Very Much*. For instance, if they “try to be with other people” very frequently, they would report this as a 5, but if they do not do this, they would select 1. How one rates the statements determines the type of coping strategies they utilize.

There are three main types of coping techniques: Task-Oriented, Emotion-Oriented, and Avoidance. Task-Oriented coping involves planning for and taking steps to change the situation or solve the problem at hand. Cognitive restructuring, or working to alter one’s own thought patterns, can also be included in the category. Individuals utilize Emotion-Oriented strategies
when they react with strong emotions. Focusing on feelings of anxiousness, getting angry, taking it out on others, “self-blaming, self-preoccupation, and fantasizing are examples” of behaviors aligned to this scale (Tirre, 2003, p. 261). These behaviors are typically ineffective and can make the situation worse. Lastly, the Avoidance scale encompasses the use of distraction and social diversion to avoid the stressor. Distraction refers to doing another activity to take one’s mind off of what is causing them stress while Social Diversion involves removing themselves from circumstances that are causing them stress to be with friends or family.

Demographic Questionnaire. Students also completed a questionnaire to gather data on their age, grade, gender, and race (see Appendix A for the Demographic Questionnaire). This demographic questionnaire was created specifically for this study.

Procedure

At her internship site, this researcher who was also the group facilitator recruited a convenience sample of gifted and talented middle school students by speaking with them during their enrichment class in which the purpose and types of activities were explained. Those students who were interested chose to take an informed consent for their parents to sign in order to participate in the study. On the first day of the group counseling intervention, informed consent, group norms, and confidentiality were discussed, and participants signed assent forms. Due to delays in receiving parent permission, those who were able and willing to participate in the research met a few days later, separately from the regularly scheduled group time, to complete the demographic questionnaire and the adolescent form of the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS). This was used as a pre-test to determine baseline data. Small groups met once a week for eight weeks during the students’ 30-minute lunch periods, therefore, there was a separate group for each grade.
Group counseling sessions were implemented using curriculum created by this researcher using a cognitive-behavioral therapeutic framework, psychoeducation, and mindfulness techniques as described in the literature review. Students learned about the role of the amygdala, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of anxiety as well as bodily signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety. Some of the other topics discussed include others' assumptions and expectations, procrastination and time management, recognizing and reframing cognitive distortions or negative thought patterns, mindfulness (e.g., deep breathing exercises), asking for help and utilizing people in their support system, and other self-care strategies. After the final group session, those involved in the research study completed the CISS once again. The pre- and post-test were then analyzed to determine changes in coping styles.

**Curriculum and Implementation**

The stress management group curriculum utilized a wide variety of psychoeducational activities, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and mindfulness. Each student was provided with a workbook in which they would complete activities in session as well as on their own time as homework, or otherwise referred to as weekly challenges. The lesson plans for all eight sessions as well as a copy of the workbook provided to students can be found in Appendix B and C respectively. It should be noted that although each session was planned as described in these resources, group sessions were delivered with flexibility to the needs of the students and school parameters such as time allowed.

The first session focused on starting to build relationships and cohesion among group members. Cohesion is an important factor in the area of group work. This concept promotes connection, acceptance, and unity among members which helps individuals trust other group members and be more willing to share their own feelings and experiences (Corey, Corey, &
Corey, 2018). It is often empowering for individuals to know that they are not the only one struggling with these issues and it gives group members an opportunity to learn from one another. According to Yalom (2005b), cohesion also contributes to better attendance and participant retention (as cited in Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). The first session also involved creating group norms, understanding the purpose of this study, and completing the CISS for the first time. In the second session, the group discussed how other people’s assumptions and expectations of them makes them feel. This was an important part of the group process as it helped the students realize they had similar experiences which seemed to validate their feelings. This allows for group cohesion which is necessary in the group counseling process (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). The focus of the third group counseling session focused on understanding anxiety and the area of the brain responsible for this emotion. Students personified this area of the brain, the amygdala by giving it a name, drawing a picture of it, and writing a letter to it (Young, 2019). Using this technique, students may understand their cognitive control over their emotional responses. Also in this session, the students identified bodily signs and symptoms of anxiety as well as techniques to help them calm down when in that state (e.g., deep breathing).

Students learned about cognitive distortions in the fourth session and practiced labeling their own negative thoughts as a type of distortion. During the next session, they began with a self-compassion exercise involving imagining a friend had a negative thought that they had themselves and discussed how they would respond. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage them to develop self-compassion as they would show to a loved one (Nevid, 2019). In a study investigating various elements of mindfulness practices and its impact on adolescents with anxiety, Johnson and Wade (2019) suggest that emphasis should be placed on being
accepting and nonjudgmental of one’s own flaws and mistakes. Being kind to themselves was found to be a protective factor against psychological distress among adolescents and was cultivated through mindfulness practices.

The students then identified evidence for and against these negative thoughts they had about themselves. This allowed them to evaluate the likelihood that the negative thought is true. Students then practiced reframing these thoughts by making them more positive. Experts suggest that this will help gifted individuals develop more helpful thought patterns and reduce anxiety (Kennedy & Farley, 2018). The purpose of these two sessions were to help them be more compassionate towards themselves. Research has shown that gifted individuals typically experience lower levels of meaningfulness and well-being in adulthood, however, these levels have been positively impacted when individuals practice self-compassion, especially when something does not go as well as they had hoped (Pollet & Schnell, 2017). As mentioned previously, this is particularly important in this population due to their often unrealistic expectations of gifted students have for themselves (Cross & Cross, 2015; Pollet & Schnell, 2017).

In the sixth session, students learned about SMART goals and created their own self-care goal which they were to work towards for the remainder of the group counseling intervention. Some examples of these goals were to read a book of their choosing for 15 minutes before going to sleep each night and taking their dog for a walk three times per week. Group members discussed their progress on these goals throughout the last few weeks.

Students evaluated the benefits and consequences to procrastinating in the seventh session. They then watched a video and identified at least one new strategy they can use to avoid procrastination. The final session focused on asking for help. Students then completed the CISS
for a second time and were provided with other mental health resources. In comparison to other CBT programs for youth with anxiety, this curriculum is quite similar. For example, Haugland et al (2017) examined two evidence-based CBT programs for use in schools, both of which incorporated psychoeducation about anxiety, discussions of the interaction between thoughts and feelings, as well as identifying evaluating, and restructuring unhelpful thoughts, and goal setting.

**Results**

To determine whether there was a change in the participants’ coping style following the 8-week stress management group counseling intervention, pre- and post-test scores were analyzed using paired t-tests. Differences in mean scores were deemed statistically significant at the 0.05 level for each scale within the CISS. There was a significant difference in the pre-test (M= 42.1, SD= 8.72) and post-test scores (M= 52.0, SD=11.68) for the task-oriented coping scale; t(9) = 2.93, p = 0.02. The pre- and post-test scores of other scales did not yield significant results (See Table 1).

The Avoidance-Oriented Coping score did not show a significant change from the pre-test (M = 37.4, SD = 8.66) to the post-test (M = 42.2, SD = 8.05; t(9) = 1.96, p = 0.08), nor did its’ subscales. There was no significant difference in Distraction scores at the beginning (M= 20.4, SD = 4.62) and after the group counseling intervention (M = 21.9, SD = 5.59; t(9) = 1.43, p = 0.19). For the Social Diversion scale, there was also no significant change in pre-test (M = 11.6, SD = 4.45) and post-test scores (M = 13.6, SD = 4.39; t(9) = 1.62, p = 0.14). Lastly, Emotion-Oriented Coping scores decreased, but were not significantly different from the start of the group counseling intervention (M = 48.8, SD = 10.41) compared to at the end of the group counseling sessions (M = 44.1, SD = 15.58); t(9) = -1.11, p = 0.30). Detailed results are displayed in Table 1.
Table 1

*Mean Differences in Pre- and Post- Intervention Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-Test</th>
<th>t (df=9)</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotion-Oriented</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>10.41</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>15.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-Oriented</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>8.72</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>11.68</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance-Oriented</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>8.66</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>8.05</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Diversion</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>4.39</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p < .05

Discussion

Just as hypothesized, participation in the 8-week stress management group counseling intervention had a positive impact on gifted students’ coping strategies. For each scale of coping, the students’ mean scores increased, except for emotion-oriented coping which decreased. The results of the study indicate that participating in the group counseling intervention significantly increased the chances that a student would use task-oriented coping strategies. This suggests that the group counseling curriculum promoted planning and problem solving as strategies to deal with stress. Participating students may also be more likely to think critically by analyzing the situation as well as their thoughts associated with the problem before responding. This may be due to activities such as setting self-care goals, evaluating and restructuring negative thoughts,
etc. These findings are consistent with the findings of James and Rimes (2017) indicating Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy approach encourages perfectionistic individuals to lessen their emotional response when something goes wrong and be more compassionate of themselves.

Decreases in emotional-oriented coping were not significant. If they had been significant, this would indicate they would be less likely to partake in self-criticism, blaming themselves or others, displacing anger on others, etc., following participation in group counseling for stress management.

When comparing CISS pre- and post-tests, overall avoidance-oriented coping scores were also not statistically significant. This dimension of the assessment consisted of the two subscales, distraction and social-diversion coping strategies. Because slight increases in the avoidance-oriented coping scores and decreases in the emotion-oriented coping did occur, further research into how the curriculum or the length of the group could be modified for significant change would be recommended. The researcher was unable to determine clinical significance in these domains.

The results of the current study are promising for the participants’ wellbeing. The significant results of this study indicate that task-oriented coping can be altered in a short time-frame and that the proposed curriculum is particularly good at teaching task-oriented coping skills. According to Higgins and Endler (1995), emotion-oriented coping techniques were associated with higher levels of physical and psychological distress whereas task-oriented coping had a negative correlation with distress, specifically among men. Therefore, an increase in task-oriented coping as seen in this study provides evidence that group counseling integrating curriculum on psychoeducation regarding the brain and anxiety, CBT, and mindfulness leads to lower levels of physical and psychological distress in gifted students. Further study on
decreasing emotional coping and increasing social diversion is recommended, as Higgins and Endler (1995) found using social diversion as a coping mechanism was linked to lower levels of depression.

Overall, it seems that participation in this group did have a positive impact on their preferred coping style, which influences their overall well-being. However, another explanation may be that perhaps gifted students are better able to grasp the concepts associated with task-oriented coping or are more inclined to utilize these strategies than other types of coping. Counselors may choose to focus more on teaching and helping gifted students develop planning, problem solving, and critical thinking skills as a means of anxiety reduction. Additionally, the data demonstrates that the differences between overall avoidance scores were approaching significance. Counselors may want to consider encouraging gifted students to partake in positive avoidance behaviors. This may look like participating in activities just for fun as well as spending time with family and friends. The results may also suggest a longer intervention may be needed to see a significant overall difference in avoidance coping.

Lastly, it is important to note that when comparing the pre- and post-tests of one particular student, there was a dramatic increase in task-oriented coping. One 8th grade student went from a raw score more than doubled after the group counseling intervention, bringing her the 16th percentile to the 99th percentile. Although drastic changes may not have occurred with every student, this shows that individual students can be greatly impacted by participating in this stress management group.

Limitations and Recommendation for Future Research
There are several limitations and possible confounding variables in the current research. The most significant limitation is the small sample size of 10 participants. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the gifted population with any certainty. Future research involving gifted students’ preferred coping styles and the impact of group counseling interventions is needed. Replicating this study and having multiple counseling groups follow the proposed curriculum may strengthen the findings of this research.

In addition, the adolescent form of the CISS was also developed and normed on a population ages 13-18 and is written at an eighth-grade reading level. As such, this may have not been an ideal assessment for all middle school students in this sample. Although, the participants seemed to comprehend the questions and the researcher was able to clarify when needed. Also, some of the items may not be applicable to this age group. For instance, one question asks how frequently the individual goes to a party as a way to cope with stress. Another issue involves test content and effects on validity; that is, in consideration that the CISS was last reviewed in 1999, therefore, items asking if they “window shop” or “phone a friend” may not be relevant to students today. Adapting or updating this instrument or use of a different assessment may need to be considered if this study were to be replicated in the future.

Another limitation to this study is the time constraint. The only time students were available to meet for this group was during their 30-minute lunch period. Sometimes, the group facilitator had to rush to cover all of the content that was planned for that session. In the future, researchers should schedule longer sessions, approximately 45 minutes if possible, or advocate for scheduled times without the confound of eating while participating in group counseling, to ensure that all of the content is covered and explained in depth. Due to the students’ maturity levels and ability to attend, another option for restructuring would be to implement shorter
sessions over a longer period of time (e.g., 12 weeks instead of 8), which might be more beneficial. It would also be interesting to see the longitudinal effects of participating in this group.

Lastly, participants were encouraged to complete small tasks (e.g., filling out a thought log and labeling cognitive distortions) to supplement what they had learned in group, however, these homework assignments were often forgotten. It may not be appropriate for homework to be a significant part of the learning, or time may be needed to be allotted during sessions to complete these tasks. Perhaps, if they were able to complete these activities in session, there would be more significant results.

**Implications for School Counselors and Counselor Educators**

It is important for school counselors to understand the unique needs of the gifted population and work towards addressing those needs. They should be aware of issues in peer relationships, possible struggles with mental health and social-emotional development such as anxiety, depression, perfectionism, etc. It is also necessary for school counselors to recognize that they may not reach out for support (Wood & Peterson, 2018). Therefore, counselors should be encouraged to seek out these students and taking a proactive approach to providing intervention and support. Offering a small group intervention such as this example is one way school counselors can work to meet the needs of this population. Based on the results of this study, it will likely encourage gifted students to utilize more healthy coping skills such as task-oriented coping skills (e.g., planning, goal setting, etc.).

It is imperative that school counselors evaluate their ability to meet gifted students’ needs in terms of multicultural competencies (Levy & Plucker, 2008). They must become aware of their own beliefs, assumptions, stereotypes, etc. of not only gifted individuals, but of other
intersections of identities that are presented (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, race, socioeconomic status). In addition, school counselors should receive some training on working with gifted students, just as they would with students in special education (Levy & Plucker, 2008, Peterson & Wachter Morris, 2010).

School counselors should increase their knowledge on the unique needs of the diverse gifted population and develop the skills necessary to meet their academic and social/emotional needs. There is little research done on how graduate programs prepare school counselors to work with this population (Peterson & Wachter Morris, 2010). According to Moon (2002), this lack of training leads to two problems: “First, very few mental health professionals know how to adapt their counseling strategies to better meet the needs of individuals with high abilities and second, untrained counselors may pathologize normal characteristics of gifted individuals” (p. 218 as cited in Wood & Peterson, 2018, p. 19). Counselor education programs should strive to prepare their students for working with these individuals by noting their needs, learning interventions that address these needs, and practicing facilitating them when possible.

Several of the counseling techniques implemented in this study can be used with other groups of students as well. For instance, cognitive restructuring can be used for any student who experiences anxiety, perfectionistic tendencies, negative self-talk, is under-performing, or has low self-esteem. Additionally, any student could benefit from learning relaxation techniques, practicing goal setting, and discussing procrastination and asking for help. The curriculum presented in this paper can be adapted to meet the needs of many populations.

Conclusion
Obviously, gifted students have unique characteristics and challenges. They may be experiencing asynchronous development and conflicts with peers. They may not feel like they fit in with their typical, same-age peers because of their giftedness. Gifted individuals may be more likely to be perfectionistic. If these perfectionistic tendencies are maladaptive, it can lead to increased stress and anxiety. The purpose of the stress management group counseling intervention outlined in this article was to help gifted students develop more useful coping strategies such as task-oriented coping while lessening their use of emotion-oriented coping techniques.

The group counseling sessions included topics such as expectations and assumptions of gifted students, psychoeducation on the brain, recognizing cognitive distortions and reframing negative thoughts, developing goals, self-care, avoiding procrastination, and asking for help. The results indicated that the initial hypothesis was accurate. Students reported using task-oriented coping techniques significantly more than at the beginning of the group counseling intervention and there was a small, but non-significant change in emotion-oriented coping. More research needs to be done on interventions such as emotion-oriented coping, their impact on gifted students preferred coping style, and overall well-being. It is also necessary for school counseling graduate programs to incorporate more training with this special population to better meet the developmental needs of gifted students.
References


https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/PositionStatements/PS_Gifted.pdf


Bailey, C. L. (2007, October). *Social and emotional needs of gifted students: What school counselors need to know to most effectively serve this diverse student population.* Paper
based on a program presented at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Columbus, OH.


Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Student Code: __________

Gender:

☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other ______________________

Grade:

☐ 6th
☐ 7th
☐ 8th

Age:

☐ 11
☐ 12
☐ 13
☐ 14

Race: (Check all that apply)

☐ White/Caucasian
☐ Black/ African American
☐ Hispanic/ Latino
☐ Asian
☐ Native American
☐ Other ______________________
TAG STRESS AND ANXIETY MANAGEMENT SMALL GROUP
DAILY LESSON PLAN

INSTRUCTOR: NAME                      DATE: WEEK 1

SPECIFIC TOPIC: Introduction

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M. 3; B-SS 1, B-SS 2

OBJECTIVE(S): Students will...

- Understand the purpose of the group/research study
- Begin to build relationships with one another
- Develop group norms/expectations

MATERIALS NEEDED: One die, demographic questionnaire, CISS, post-it notes, writing utensils

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 5 minutes                | Focusing Event           | (D)ice Breaker  
Students will introduce themselves, roll a die and tell the group their...  
1. Favorite book/movie  
2. Favorite food  
3. Favorite place they’ve ever been  
4. Favorite music artist/band/song  
5. Favorite thing to do in your free time  
6. Favorite subject in school |
<p>| 5 minutes                | Informed Consent         | I will explain the purpose of the small group and research, the risks and benefits, etc. Students will be asked to sign the assent form. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-15 minutes</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Students will be asked to complete the demographic questionnaire and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) - Adolescent Version</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 5 minutes  | Group Norms       | I will go over group expectations:  
  **Be Respectful** - listen/give your full attention to whoever is speaking, be kind to one another, do not share others’ personal information with people outside of group  
  **Be Responsible** - be on time and do your part/participate  
  **Be Safe** - only share what you feel comfortable sharing and help others feel safe by avoiding hurtful comments  
  Students will then be given the opportunity to add to the norms by writing suggestions on post-it notes |
| 1 minute   | Homework          | Students will be asked to write 3-5 sentences in their workbook about what it being a TAG student means to them and what they see as the pros/cons of being a TAG student. They will discuss this next time. |
INSTRUCTOR: Name

DATE: WEEK 2

SPECIFIC TOPIC: Assumptions and Expectations

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M.1; B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 3

OBJECTIVE(S): Students will be able to identify other’s assumptions and expectations of them and how it impacts them.

MATERIALS NEEDED: Workbook, scissors, colored pencils/ markers, writing utensils, paper fasteners

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Students will pair up with someone they don’t know very well. They will have two minutes to learn at least one new thing about each other. Then, we will go around the room and students will introduce their partner and what they learned about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>We will briefly discuss what they wrote about for their homework (see 10/15). Then, we will talk about how others perceive them. What expectations do their teachers and parents have for them? What do people assume about them because of their label as a TAG student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Craft</td>
<td>*TAG Armor Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students will be given a picture of a knight. On the armor, they will write about how others see them (i.e., the expectations/ assumptions others place upon them). Underneath the mask, they will write things that others don’t know or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 notice about them. While they are coloring/decorating their armor, students will have the opportunity to share what they wrote, their feelings surrounding this, and I will inform them that there is a human underneath that armor. Humans are not perfect; they struggle, make mistakes, and need help sometimes. Then, we will brainstorm ways to show others the human underneath the TAG armor. By removing their “armor”, it’s true, they may become more vulnerable, but it allows them to show others who they truly are which is actually really brave.

| 1 minute | Homework | Students will be asked to share what they wrote during the TAG Armor activity with a trusted adult (e.g., teacher or their parent/guardian). |

INSTRUCTOR: Name

DATE: WEEK 3

SPECIFIC TOPIC: Stress, Anxiety and the Brain

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M.1; B-LS 2, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1

OBJECTIVE(S): Students will be able to...

- Define anxiety and describe the area of the brain responsible for it
- Recognize bodily signs/symptoms of anxiety
Determine whether or not they are truly in danger

Practice a breathing technique to help them calm down when they are feeling anxious

MATERIALS NEEDED: Workbook, *Hey, Warrior* (picture book), colored pencils/ markers, writing utensil

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<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>Yoga/ Stretching&lt;br&gt;Students will learn the warrior pose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Read Aloud</td>
<td>We will first define stress and anxiety. Then, I will read the book <em>Hey, Warrior</em> by Karen Young (2019) and students will follow along with a worksheet. While reading the book, we will also be practicing taking some deep breaths to calm our amygdala (anxiety). Then, they will be asked to draw and name their own warrior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Students will answer the following questions in their workbook on their own first:&lt;br&gt;One thing that causes me to feel stressed/ anxious is...&lt;br&gt;I know I am feeling stressed/ anxious because I notice (bodily signs/symptoms)...&lt;br&gt;One thing I can do to calm my warrior (amygdala) down when I am feeling this way is...&lt;br&gt;I will have an outline of a person’s upper body on the white board. I will ask them to share things that cause them to feel anxious and I will write them on the outside...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the body outline. Then they will share signs/symptoms which will be written on the inside of the body outline (Fight or Flight (CYP), n.d.). Finally, I will ask what coping skills they can use to help calm their warrior/amygdala/anxiety.

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<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Students will be asked to write a letter to their warrior (amygdala) when they are feeling stressed/anxious before we meet again next week.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INSTRUCTOR: Name  
DATE: WEEK 4  
SPECIFIC TOPIC: Negative Thoughts/ Cognitive Distortions  
ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M 1, M 2; B-LS 1, B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 6, B-SS 7  
OBJECTIVE(S): Students will be able to...  
Recognize negative thoughts in themselves  
Define and identify cognitive distortions  
MATERIALS NEEDED: Workbook, writing utensils, matching game  

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<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
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</table>
| 2 minutes                | Focusing Event   | Dragon Breath  
Students will inhale for four seconds, imagining they are inhaling peace and calmness. They will then exhale as if they were breathing fire for four seconds, imagining they are exhaling stress and anxiety. Students will have the option to open their mouth wide and... |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>Psychoeducation/ Information Giving</td>
<td>I will begin by showing them a picture of an illusion (see Figure 1) and ask which orange dot is bigger. I will then cut out the orange dots to show that they are actually the same size. We will then discuss that sometimes our brain misinterprets information and that it can be wrong. This can also happen with thoughts about ourselves. We will then define what a cognitive distortion is and I will present on the 10 main types of cognitive distortions using a PowerPoint (Cochimiglio, 2018; Scharf, 2008; Unhelpful Thinking Styles, n.d.).</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Matching Game</td>
<td>Students will split into groups of 3 or 4. Each group will be given a set of cards which includes the name of each cognitive distortion and an example of each. Their job is to match the example to the distortion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Students will be asked to write down one negative thought they have each day over the next week (7 total) and determine what type of cognitive distortion it is.</td>
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</table>
INSTRUCTOR: Name  DATE: WEEK 5

SPECIFIC TOPIC: Clue Snooping and Reframing Negative Thoughts

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M 1, M 2; B-LS 1, B-LS 9, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 6

OBJECTIVE(S): Students will be able to...

  Identify evidence for and against the negative thoughts they have

  Evaluate the likelihood that their worry will actually come to fruition

MATERIALS NEEDED:

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<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>Self-Compassion Exercise</td>
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<td>Students will be asked to recall a negative thought they had recently. Then, they will</td>
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<td>imagine that a loved one (e.g., sibling, best friend, etc.) said that about themselves.</td>
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<td>They will reflect on how they might respond. They will write this down and then read it</td>
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<td>back to themselves. I will remind them that we should all be just as kind to ourselves</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>as we would be to someone we love (Nevid, 2019).</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>As a group we will discuss the difference between a thought being possible (could this</td>
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<td>happen?) versus probable (how likely is this to happen?). We will use an example to</td>
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<td>evaluate (I will have one prepared). We will ask ourselves questions like: What</td>
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<td></td>
<td>information do we have? Do we have evidence for or against this thought?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Has this happened before? If so, how did it turn out? What can we do to lessen the likelihood that this thought will come true? Are there any other explanations?

| 5 minutes | Partner Work | Students will be given two post-it notes. On one, they will write a negative thought they have had recently. They will crumple this up and throw it in the trash. Then, on the second post-it note, they will write their thought in a more positive way (reframe). They will be asked to keep this somewhere safe so they can go back and read it when they need to. They will be given the opportunity to share their new thought with the group if they would like. |

| 5 minutes | Homework | Make at least three entries in their thought log over the next week. I will take this time to explain the thought log and provide them with an example. |

---

**INSTRUCTOR: Name**  
**DATE: WEEK 6**

**SPECIFIC TOPIC: Goal Setting**

**ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors:** M 1; B-LS 7, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1

**OBJECTIVE(S):** Students will be able to develop SMART self-care goals

**MATERIALS NEEDED:** Workbook, writing utensils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>*Bow and Arrow Breathing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students will act as if they are shooting a bow and arrow. They will be asked to imagine their worry/stressor as the target. They can choose to close their eyes or find a place on the wall to direct their gaze. As they inhale, they will pull back one arm as if they are about to shoot. They will be encouraged to clench their fists and tighten their arm/shoulder muscles as they do this. As they exhale, they will imagine releasing the arrow (as well as the tension) and that the arrow shatters their worry/stressor. This may be repeated using the other arm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>We will talk about what self-care means and how to create a SMART goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Students will develop their own SMART self-care goal. I will be walking around to ensure they understand how to write in a SMART goals format.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion/ Group Share</td>
<td>We will go around the circle to share our goal. I will explain that sharing your goal with others is important because they can help hold you accountable which will make it more likely that you follow through and reach your goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 minute</td>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Students will be encouraged to share their goal with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
someone at home (e.g., sibling, parent, etc.) so they can help hold them accountable outside of school. We will be checking in on this goal periodically.

INSTRUCTOR: Name
DATE: WEEK 7

SPECIFIC TOPIC: Procrastination

ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors: M 6; B-LS 3, B-LS 4, B-SMS 5, B-SMS 6, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1

OBJECTIVE(S): Students will be able to...
- Define procrastination
- Evaluate costs and benefits of procrastination
- Identify at least one strategy they can use to reduce procrastination

MATERIALS NEEDED: Workbook, writing utensils, projector/screen for video

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Time (Approx.)</th>
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<th>Explanation of Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>Self-Care Goal Check-In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I will ask students to rate how their self-care goal is going with a thumbs up, sideways, or down. If it is not going well, we may talk about barriers to meeting their goal and/or asking the group for suggestions for how to change the goal to meet the student’s needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Students will be asked what it means to procrastinate, brainstorm possible reasons for, costs and benefits of procrastination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Video</td>
<td>How to Stop Procrastinating and Get Stuff Done from the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Specific Topic: Asking for Help and Closing

**ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors:** M 3; B-SMS 6, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 3, B-SS 8

**Objective(s):** Students will be able to...

- Understand the benefits to asking for help
- Identify resources and support people who can help them

**Materials Needed:** Workbook, two bricks, writing utensils, and CISS

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Focusing Event</td>
<td>Practicing Gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students will list 5 things (or people) that they are grateful for and will be given the opportunity to share one if they wish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Demonstration &amp; Discussion</td>
<td>Brick Activity (Ohms, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I will ask for two volunteers. They will each be asked to hold a brick (or another heavy object) out in front of them. They must keep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their elbows straight and arms must be parallel to the floor. They will be told that they can ask for help at any time and that the person who hold it up the longest wins.

Once one student gives up, we will discuss the following questions:
What do you think the brick represents?
(Answer: a problem)
How did you feel during the challenge?
If you asked for help, how did it feel when you did?
What prevented you from asking for help?
What are the benefits to asking for help? They will be writing about this in their workbook.

*Then, students will be asked to write the names of at least 5 people they could ask for help on the stones of the castle located on a worksheet in their workbook. Then, they will choose 3 colors that represents the type of problem they can help with (academic, social/emotional, or both) and color the person’s stone the designated color. They should list at least one trusted adult that they can go to for social/emotional concerns. If
time allows, students may share about who is in their support system with the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 minutes</td>
<td>Information Giving</td>
<td>I will provide students with a list of local and national resources they can use if they have concerns about their mental health as well as some mindfulness/meditation apps they could download and use at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 minutes</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Students will complete the CISS – Adolescent Version</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TAG Stress/Anxiety Management Workbook

Student Name:
Group Expectations

Be Respectful
- Listen and give your full attention to whoever is speaking
- Do not share group members’ personal information with others outside of this group
- Be kind to one another

Be Responsible
- Come to group on time
- Participate in group discussions

Be Safe
- Only share to the level you feel comfortable sharing
- Help others feel safe by avoiding hurtful comments
Journal

(Write 3–5 Sentences)

What does being a TAG student mean to you? What are the benefits? Are there any downfalls to being a TAG student?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
The TAG Label

**Vocabulary**
Assumption: something that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof
Expectation: a belief that someone will or should achieve something.

**Warm-Up**
I think that my teachers assume/expect ____________________________
______________________________ because I am a TAG student.
I think that my parents or guardians assume/expect _________
______________________________ because I am a TAG student.
This makes me feel ____________________________ .

**Activity**
On the next page, you will find a picture of a knight. On the armor, write how you think others perceive or view you because of your TAG label. Where the person’s face would be, write what others don’t see or notice about you. What are some things you wish people knew about you?

**Wrap-Up**
I can show people what is hiding under my TAG armor by ____________________________ .

**Weekly Challenge**
Talk with a trusted adult (e.g., parent or teacher) about what you wrote on/under your TAG armor.
* Remember that under the mask is a human being. Humans are not perfect! They struggle, make mistakes, and sometimes need help... And that is okay! Allow yourself to be human! You can be brave by removing your armor and sharing your true self with the people you trust.
Stress, Anxiety, and the Brain

Vocabulary
Stress: strain or tension due to demanding situations
Anxiety: a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease

Warm-Up
Some things that cause me to feel stressed or anxious are
______________________________________________________.

Read Aloud
Anxiety happens when your ____________________________
(part of your brain) thinks ____________________________.
It is always working hard to ____________________________
even when you don’t need ____________________________.
It _____________ you up to make you ____________________________
in case you need to ____________________________
in case you need to _____________________________. Always remember, anxiety is a
sign that you are about to do something really _____________.

Think, Then Share
I know when I am feeling stressed or anxious because I notice
______________________________________________________
______________________________________________________.
One strategy I can try to help calm my warrior (amygdala)
down when I am feeling this way is ____________________________
______________________________________________________.
Wrap-Up

Draw a picture of your warrior below. You can choose to give it a name if you wish.

Weekly Challenge

Over the next week, try to notice when you are feeling stressed or anxious. Then, write a letter to your warrior.

Hint: You may want to say things like “thank you for keeping me safe”, “I’m not in any danger right now”, or “I can handle this on my own”.
Write a Letter to Your Warrior (Amygdala)

Dear __________________________.

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Sincerely,

_________________________
Cognitive Distortions

Vocabulary
Cognitive distortion: a negative thought that is exaggerated and/or untrue

Warm-Up
Dragon Breath (see resource pages for instructions)

Activity
T or F    My thoughts are always accurate.
I used to think ________________________________
______________________________ but, I realized this wasn’t true.

Listen and Learn

1. Labeling

2. All or Nothing Thinking

3. Jumping to Conclusions
   X  Mind-Reading

   X  Fortune-Telling

4. Overgeneralization
Cognitive Distortions

5. Catastrophizing

6. Mental Filtering

7. Disqualifying the Positive

8. Shoulds and Musts

9. Personalization

10. Emotional Reasoning

Activity
Get into groups of 3 or 4. You will be given a set of cards. Your job is to match the example to the type of cognitive distortion.

Weekly Challenge
Pay attention to when negative thoughts pop into your head. Write them down and determine what type of cognitive distortion it is. Try to do this once a day (7 times total) before we meet next week.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Distortion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practicing Self-Compassion

Warm-Up

Imagine a someone you care about (e.g., your sibling, best friend, etc.) came up to you and said

“__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________”

(insert a negative thought you have had recently)

How would you respond?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Now, read that back to yourself. Remember to be as kind to yourself as you would to someone you love.
Clue Snooping

Vocabulary
Possibility: something that may happen or be the case
Probability: the likelihood of something happening
Reframe: to express or word something differently

Think, Then Share
T or F It is possible for you to get attacked by a shark right now.
T or F It is possible for you to fail a test.
What do you think is the probability or likelihood of you failing a test? ________________________________
What can you do to prevent this? ________________________________

During science class, Logan was called on by the teacher and he gave an incorrect answer to a question. He heard some students in the back of the room giggling. Logan assumed that they were laughing at him and felt really embarrassed. He thought to himself, “Wow, I’m so stupid!”

What are some questions Logan should ask himself to determine if his thoughts are accurate?

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________
Reframing Negative Thoughts
What is something positive Logan could say to himself?

Serena is studying for a history test and is getting frustrated because she can't seem to remember the information. She says to her mom, “I just know I’m going to fail”.
How could Serena reframe that thought?

What can Serena do to prevent or decrease the likelihood (probability) that this will happen?

Take two post-it notes. On one, write a negative thought you have had about yourself recently. Crumple it up and through it in the trash. That is where trash-talk belongs! On the second post-it note, reframe that thought to be more positive. Keep this with you and look at it when you need a reminder of how awesome you are!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Evidence For/Against</th>
<th>Reframed Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>How did you feel?</td>
<td>What negative thought came up for you?</td>
<td>What proof do you have that this is true? What evidence do you have that tells you it is false? How likely is it? Can you do something to reduce the probability? Are there other explanations?</td>
<td>Rewrite your thought in a more positive way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought Log</td>
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</table>
Setting SMART Self-Care Goals

Vocabulary
Self-care: the practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress

Warm-Up
Bow and Arrow Breathing (see resource pages for instructions)

Activity
What fills your cup?

Think about the activities that you love doing, that make you feel good, spark joy and give you energy. Write these activities on a post-it note and put it in the cup in the center of the table.

T or F The same self-care strategies will work for everyone.

Wrap-Up
Create your own self-care goal on the next page.

Weekly Challenge
Work towards your goal and share it with someone at home.
Setting SMART Self-Care Goals

**Specific:** What exactly do you hope to accomplish? Be as detailed as possible.

**Measurable:** How will you track your goal? How will you know when you reach your goal?

**Attainable:** Is it possible for you to reach this goal? What might get in your way? How can you overcome this?

**Relevant:** Why is this goal important to you right now?

**Time-Bound:** When do you want to accomplish your goal by?

**Student Signature:**
Avoiding Procrastination

Vocabulary
Procrastination: delay or postpone action

Warm-Up
Self-care goal check-in

Think, Pair, Share
T or F I tend to procrastinate or put things off.
If you said true, answer the following question:
One reason I procrastinate is because __________________________.
If you said false, answer the following question:
I try not to procrastinate because __________________________.

Video
How to Stop Procrastinating and Get Stuff Done
To rewatch the video, scan the QR code (Skip to 3:10)

Wrap-Up
One new strategy for avoiding procrastination from the video that I can try is __________________________.

Weekly Challenge
Try out your new strategy!
Asking for Help

Warm-Up

Practicing Gratitude

Name 5 things (or people) that you are thankful for.

1. ________________________________
2. ________________________________
3. ________________________________
4. ________________________________
5. ________________________________

Activity

It is important to ask for help when I need it because

_____________________________________________.

One thing that gets in my way of asking for help is

_____________________________________________.

I can get over this barrier by ________________________________

_____________________________________________.

Wrap-Up    Complete the next page.

Weekly Challenge

Ask for help at least once this week. Use exercises we practiced in group as well as the additional resources at the end of this workbook if you need it.
Using Your Support System

Your support system consists of people in your life who are there to listen, encourage, and help you through hard times. On the stones of the castle, write the names of at least 5 people who you can go to for help when you are struggling with something.

Choose three colors to represent the following types problems they can help you with:

- □ Academics
- □ Social/Emotional
  (Friendship issues, fitting in, feelings of stress/anxiety, sadness, etc.)
- □ Both

Then, color each person’s stone with the problem(s) they can help you with as listed above.
Additional Resources

Breathing Exercises

Dragon Breath

Inhale for 4 seconds and exhale for 4 seconds as if you are breathing fire like a dragon. As you do this you can repeat to yourself, “inhale calm/peace, exhale stress/anxiety.”

Bow and Arrow Breathing

Picture your stressor or worry as your target. Start with your arms extended and hands in fists, fairly close together. As you inhale for 4 seconds, pull one arm back as if you are about to shoot your bow and arrow. Tighten your fists, arm, and shoulder muscles. Hold this for 4 seconds. Release the arrow and relax your muscles as you exhale for 4 seconds. Picture the arrow hitting your target (stressor/worry) and shattering it.

Box Breathing

Trace your finger along the outline of the box as you follow the directions.

Grounding Technique

When you are feeling anxious, focus on the present moment and your current surroundings. You can do this by identifying...

5 things you can see
4 things you can feel
3 things you can hear
2 things you can smell
1 thing you can taste
Additional Resources

Meditation/Mindfulness Apps
- Smiling Mind
- Calm
- DreamyKid
- Headspace
- Stop, Breathe & Think
- Insight Timer

Crisis/Emergency Resources

Local Resources
Call 911, 211, or (608) 784-4357

National Resources
Call 1-800-273-8255 or text TALK to 741741