



Erasmus + VET Strategic Partnership

IENE 8 – Empowering Migrant and Refugee Families with Parenting Skills

Bite-sized Learning Unit number 4.5

MINDFULNESS AND STRESS REDUCTION

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FROM INNER UNREST TO INNER CALM

This learning unit will present the cultural concept of mindfulness (the conscious perception of small things, of oneself). It will explain why mindfulness and stress reduction are relevant to refugee families and what can be done to reach a sound level of mindfulness towards oneself as well as towards one's own children.

OBJECTIVES

In this learning unit parents and health workers will learn:

1. the definitions of stress and mindfulness;
2. the relevance of the topic for refugee families;
3. the interdependence between mindfulness and stress;
4. the positive effects of mindfulness on adults.

DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF STRESS AND MINDFULNESS

The word **stress** is known in many countries and languages. It is a cultural concept which usually expresses that I cannot manage something, that I cannot endure a situation, that I am overstrained and I get sick or feel sick as a consequence. In some countries this experience is also referred to as having "problems with one's nerves".



The English word stress, which is the same in German, has multiple meanings such as "tension, pressure, strain or stretching". The term was introduced by the Hungarian biochemist Hans Selye (1907-1982) in 1936. Etymologically, the word stress stems from the Latin word "strenger" which means to be under tension. The term "stress" describes a natural and evolutionary reaction of human beings to threat situations. In order to escape a dangerous situation, the human body releases stress hormones, enhancing the physical performance for a short time to be able to react to threats to one's own life by means of fighting or fleeing. In modern everyday life, however, fighting or fleeing are normally not necessary anymore. Despite all this, many people describe that they are under stress and under tension. People nowadays often lack an outlet to release those tensions. This results in a permanent state of illness with permanent tension.

Another model (**The Coping Model by Lazarus**) assumes that it is not the (objective) nature of stimulations or situations that are relevant for the stress reaction, but it is their (subjective) assessment by the affected person. Human beings can be extremely different in their vulnerability to a certain stressor: what might be stress for an affected person, might not yet be perceived as stress by another person. According to literature (statista 2019), almost 60% of German adults feel

(i.e. subjective) stressed often or sometimes. They feel they are not up to the tasks in everyday working life or they do not do justice to their families, their jobs or their relationships. Stress is very individual for every human being. Refugees also show symptoms of stress and do not feel capable of fulfilling their parental duties. The causes are, amongst others, that refugee families live under difficult conditions in the host countries. They come from diverse contexts and circumstances, they are uprooted, they live in spatio-temporal uncertainty, they have often gone through traumas and abuses and they feel powerless in their role as parents. All these factors can entail that refugee families feel „stressed“, that they do not know how to cope with the permanent tension of their insecure legal status in the host country or living in reception centers or the fact that they are not allowed to work or not being capable of fulfilling their parental duties.

Symptoms of stress can include, among many others, heart palpitation or throbbing, a more shallow and rapid breathing, tensions of the back muscles, shoulder muscles and /or neck muscles, increased sweating and dry mouth.

Mindfulness has its origins in Buddhist philosophy and was taught in order to alleviate suffering and nurture compassion (White, 2014). Mindfulness entails purpose, awareness and attention in the present moment. “Mindfulness is a transformative process where one develops an increasing ability to ‘experience being present’, with ‘acceptance’, ‘attention’ and ‘awareness’” (White, 2014, S. 282). **Resilience** is understood to be “the ability of people to overcome crises in their lives by drawing on personal and socially mediated resources and to use these crises as a motive for development (Welder-Enderlin/Hildebrand, 2006:13)“. The seven pillars of resilience include:



Optimism	I have managed to flee to this country with my family.
Acceptance	I cannot change the situation at the moment. I have to wait for the decision of the Foreigners' Registration Office.
Solution orientation	I cannot make plans for the future. But I can make sure that I have strength and that I care for the children. I will go to the yoga course.
Planning for the future	Even though I do not know what the decision of the Foreigners' Registration Office will be like, I will go to my German classes every day to learn the language.
Leaving the victim role	The Foreigners' Registration Office has still not contacted me concerning its decision. But life has to go on. I will see what I can do here in the facility.
Taking over responsibility	The situation is unsatisfactory. But I will still take care of my children.

Network orientation	I will get in touch with other mothers. Then one mother can look after the other children as well sometime.
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In the context of IENE 8

For refugee families it is important to know what it means „to be stressed out“, how to deal with the situation and what could be done to reduce stress and to reach a capacity to treat oneself and others in a mindful way. These topics will be covered in the IENE-8-project and health care workers will be trained in order to pay thorough attention to certain symptoms and to support families in coping with difficult situations.

KEY POINTS

(Three PowerPoint slides with key points and diagrams /pictures from research)

ACTIVITY

Please write down answers for yourself:

- a) What difficult situation have I overcome before?
- b) How have I experienced stress?
- c) What was the positive aspect in a bad situation?
- d) What has helped me to deal with the situation?

REFLECTION ON A TOPIC: STRESS AND MINDFULNESS

Learning insight: please think about it once again: is every kind of stress negative? Or are there also moments in life in which a stressful situation can actually be positive?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Please reflect about what you would write down for yourself in your present-day situation:

Optimism: what makes me feel positive?	
Acceptance: can I accept the present-day situation?	
Solution orientation: am I able to find a solution to a problem?	
Planning for the future: can I make any plans for next week?	
Leaving the victim role: the situation is difficult. Can I manage it nevertheless?	
Taking over responsibility: my children need me. Am I aware of the fact that I have to take care of them?	
Network orientation: are there any other families who can support me?	

LITERATURE / RESOURCES

1. Kaluza, G. (2015). Stressbewältigung. Trainingsmanual zur psychologischen Gesundheitsförderung. [*Stress Management. Training Manual on Psychological Health Promotion*]. Heidelberg: Springer Verlag.
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3. Lazarus, E. (1991). Emotion and Adaptation. New York: Oxford University Press.
4. Statista (www.statista.de)