Dealing With Digital Stress

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson, students reflect on the ways in which digital media can cause stress. Through a series of role-playing exercises, they consider how social media can cause stress by making us compare the highlights of others' lives to the lowlights of our own, and practice strategies for coping with digital stress.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Reflect on their digital habits and coping skills
- Perform short scenes that deal with a social issue
- Learn and practice skills for managing stress and maintaining life balance
- Learn how to manage the role of digital media in general, and social media in particular, in their lives
- Create a media product (optional)
- Use social media for learning (optional)

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Digital Stress Self-Test*
- *Dealing With Digital Stress*
- *Cheerleader Game Scenarios* (there are eleven scenarios; make 3 copies of each)

Optional: Provide or have students bring cameras (still or video; cell phone cameras can be used) and provide access to video-editing software or a photo-hosting site or set up a real or mock social network profile for the "Better or Worse" activity.

Procedure

Digital Stress

Begin by distributing the handout *Digital Stress Self-Test* and read through it with the class. After reassuring them that nobody (including you) will see the results, have students complete the handout.

Once students have completed the self-test, have them turn the page over and *reflect for five minutes* on the question of what causes digital stress. Then have them do five minutes of "Wild Mind" writing on that question. (Make sure that nobody starts writing before the five minutes' reflection time is up, and that during the five minutes of "Wild Mind" writing they do not stop or take their pens or pencils off the paper). Reassure them that if they can't think of anything to write, they can repeat the question or simply write "I can't think of anything to write."

After the five-minute writing session, have students read what they wrote and then share with the class what they think causes digital stress. (They should not read their "Wild Mind" writing verbatim, but "mine" it for insights to share.) Make sure the following things come up:

- Social media can make you worry about getting left out or about what people are saying about you if you aren't constantly checking it.

- Social media can make you feel like other people are having more fun or have better lives than you because you only see the highlights of their lives.

- You can feel pressure to always seem positive in your social media.

- Social media can make it hard to get work done or enjoy things because you're always checking it or posting to it.

- Digital stress affects both boys and girls. (In fact, some research has found that boys are *more* affected by digital stress than girls!)

Better or Worse

Now tell students you are going to explore the causes of digital stress through a drama game called "Better or Worse." Have the class pick a social event that they might participate in, such as a date, a party, a sports event, a trip to the beach, etc. Recruit enough students to act out key roles in the event. Then have other students write down positive and negative things that might happen to different people at the event (positive examples might include: you sink a basket at a basketball game, or meet someone you like at a party; negative examples might include: you slip and fall down at a basketball game, or spill a drink on someone you like at a party.) Have the students pass their written suggestions to you (so that you can weed out any that are inappropriate), select an equal number of positive and negative examples, and give them to the students acting in the scene to read without sharing them with the rest of the class.

Now divide the rest of the class into the Positive team and the Negative team. Each team is going to selectively document the scene, with the Positive team only recording positive events and the Negative team only recording negative events. Depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, the teams may either document these with cameras or simply by writing them down. Once the scene has been completed, the two teams will assemble their "version" of the event: again depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, this can be done simply by reading the list, by editing together the video they recorded, or by posting photos to a photo-hosting site or a real or mock social networking profile.

Dealing With Digital Stress

Ask students how they would feel if they saw the "positive" version on someone's social network and how they would feel if they saw the "negative" version. If both the positive and negative events happened to them, would they feel pressure to post more of one type or another?

Distribute the handout *Dealing With Digital Stress* and go through it with the class. Wherever possible, draw connections back to the scene and the *Digital Stress Self-Test*.

Cheerleader Game

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Distribute the handout *Cheerleader Game Scenarios* and assign one scenario handout to each of the groups. In each group, one or two students should play the characters in the scenario while the other two should act as "cheerleaders" who periodically "freeze" the action to suggest how the characters could use strategies from the *Dealing With Digital Stress* handout to manage their digital stress. Depending on your technical capabilities and time constraints, these scenes can be done as live skits, as videos, or in real or mock social networks.

Digital Stress Self-Test

Digital stress means stress that we have from using digital devices (such as phones, computers, game consoles, etc.) and digital media (such as social networks, games, messenger apps, etc.)

Professor Firdaus Dhabhar at the Stanford Center on Stress and Health defines stress as "a constellation of events that begins with a stimulus or challenge—a stressor—that is detected by the brain which activates the fight-or-flight systems in the body—the biological stress response." *Short-term stress* can be a useful thing: it can give us better physical or mental performance when we're in danger or a lot is at stake. But *long-term stress*, when we stay stressed for long periods without time to rest or relax, can have a lot of negative effects like increasing the risk of depression.

Take the quiz below to see how much digital stress you're under. Check the box next to each statement that you feel is true of you, then count up your score out of 25. Don't worry – you won't have to share your score or your specific responses with anybody.

- ❑ I could not guess how many times I check my social media (Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) in a day.
- ❑ I find it stressful to go a long time (like a class period) without checking my social media.
- ❑ I could not guess how much time I spend playing online games in a week.
- ❑ I worry about what other people will think or say about me if I go a long time without posting on my social media or without playing online games.
- ❑ I have missed out on in-person experiences with my friends and family because I was checking social media or playing games.
- ❑ I have been late for appointments with my friends or family because I was checking social media or playing games.
- ❑ I have been late for school assignments because I was checking social media or playing games.
- ❑ I have thought that I heard or felt a notification (new post, reply, text, etc.) from my phone that wasn't really there.
- ❑ I have told myself I'll go to sleep after a post gets one more reaction.
- ❑ I have told myself I'll go to sleep after I get one more thing (a new level, an item, a badge, etc.) in an online game.
- ❑ I have gotten up in the night to check my phone.
- ❑ I often play games or check my social media when my parents think I am asleep.
- ❑ I keep track of how many photos or posts I am tagged in.
- ❑ I often compare my life to other people's based on what I see on social media.
- ❑ I have taken down a post because it didn't get enough likes or other responses.
- ❑ I have checked what other people are posting about an event (a party, a sports event, etc.) during that event.
- ❑ I have missed out on enjoying things because I was busy documenting them (taking pictures, posting about them, etc.).

- ❏ I often worry that my friends are having fun without me.
- ❏ I worry about missing out on my friends' inside jokes if I don't check my social media.
- ❏ I sometimes think my friends post things just to make me feel jealous or left out.
- ❏ I feel like I should only post things that are positive and make me look like I'm happy.
- ❏ I make sure to post to my social networks whenever something good happens to me.
- ❏ I have asked my friends to take down photos of me because I don't think I look good in them.
- ❏ I have posted provocative, offensive or revealing posts or photos because I knew they would get more reactions.
- ❏ There is a big difference between the person I am online and offline.

Reflection

Now that you've finished your self-test and added up your score, you're going to take *five minutes* to reflect quietly on what you think causes digital stress. Then you're going to do five minutes of "wild mind" writing starting with the phrase "Digital stress is".

What is wild mind writing?

Wild mind writing is a way of getting past your inner editor to what you really think and feel. The rules of wild mind writing are:

1. You will write for the whole five minutes.
2. Keep your hand moving. If you can't think of anything to write, rewrite the starting phrase ("digital stress is") until you start writing something else.
3. Don't stop to reread the line you have just written.
4. Don't delete or cross out anything you've written.
5. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar.

(Source: *Wild Mind* by Nathalie Goldberg)

You will *not* have to read what you've written, or share any part of it if you don't want to.

Dealing With Digital Stress

There are three main ways of dealing with digital stress. The first is through *time management:* if your time is better organized, your online life won't get in the way of other things you need to do. The second is through *changing your habits and attitudes* to make your digital life less stressful. Finally, it's important to *make time for rest and reflection* so that you aren't constantly under stress.

Time Management

- You can't do everything. Think about the things that are most important to you (School? Work? Family? Hobbies?) and make sure to put those *first*.

- Make a to-do list of things you *need* to do and use a planner to keep track of them. Prioritize the list by putting the most important things first.

- Put your digital devices to work *for* you by using calendar apps to remind you *before* things are supposed to be done.

- Decide *ahead of time* when you're going to check social media. Do it at specific times (every half hour, for example, or when you've finished a specific task) rather than whenever you feel like it. If going a long time without checking is hard for you, start by going a shorter time and then make it a bit longer every day.

Changing Habits and Attitudes

- Don't compare yourself to people you see online – including your friends. Remember that people usually just post their good news and their best pics online – and a lot of people edit their photos and use filters to make them look as good as possible.

- Be where you are, when you are. When you're doing something fun, enjoy it. Don't worry about getting pictures of it or worrying about what other people will think of it.

- Accept that you can't be there for everything – even virtually. Trying to keep tabs on everything will just stress you out.

- Don't take it personally. Odds are, your friends aren't posting things to make you jealous: they're trying to make themselves and their lives look good, just like you.

- Be honest. You may feel like people expect you to only share positive things, but research has shown that people are actually happier – and get more emotional support from others – when they are honest about how they present themselves online.

Making Time for Rest and Reflection

- When you're not using your devices, turn off your notifications. You can't relax when your phone is always pinging or buzzing, or even when you're expecting it to.

- Play a game of "phone stack" with your friends: when you're hanging out together, everyone puts their phones (or any other digital device) in a pile. Whoever can last longest without picking theirs up wins!

- Log out of all your social networks and turn off your phone at bedtime – totally off. Not only will you be better rested, but there's no chance of "sleep-texting" something silly or embarrassing!

- Schedule time when you're awake but not using social media. Research has shown that even ten minutes of "unitasking" – doing things like going for a walk, exercising, or spending time with a friend – can do a lot to relieve stress.

- Take an occasional vacation from social media and digital devices. If that sounds hard for you, start with one day a month and try to work up to one day a week or more.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario One

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You take a photo of yourself that you really like and post it to your Instagram account. After an hour you check to see how your friends have responded and it's only gotten three likes. It's your favourite picture of yourself ever, but you feel embarrassed that it's gotten so few likes and think about taking it down.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Two

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Right before exam time you get asked to become the new team leader in your favourite online game. You need to study but you also feel like you'd be letting down your team members if you cut back on your playing time.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Three

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Two of you are going to a big new movie on opening night. One of you gets annoyed with the other because s/he keeps texting other friends who are seeing the movie and checking the movie's hashtag on Twitter to see what other people are posting about it.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Four

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Your parents take you on a surprise camping trip. You forget to post about it on your social media before you leave and after two days you start to worry about what your friends are saying about you, because you've never gone two days without posting something before.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Five

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

Your friend tags you in a photo that was taken at a party. Your friend looks great, but you're in the photo too and you look terrible! Your friend loves the photo but you really want him/her to take it down.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Six

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You check your social media in the morning and see that all of your friends are posting about going out for pizza together the night before – without you. You couldn't go because you were working, but you still feel sort of like they're teasing you by posting about how great it was.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Seven

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You just got the new expansion for your favourite game and the first mission is really long. You don't want to quit for the night without finishing it, though, so you stay up late and wind up oversleeping and being late for school the next morning.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Eight

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You and a friend are supposed to work on a project together for school. The problem is that another friend of yours is having a crisis and keeps texting you for advice, so you can't concentrate on doing your part of the project.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Nine

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You're feeling sad because you got a bad mark on a test, so you post a message asking your friends to cheer you up. When only a few of them reply, though, you feel worse than you did before.

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Ten

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You get really good news the morning before a test and post about it before class. During the test you keep feeling your phone buzzing as people respond to your post. Finally you can't resist it and check your notifications, but your teacher sees you and thinks you're cheating!

The Cheerleader Game – Scenario Eleven

This exercise is a version of the improv game "Freeze". One or more of you will be acting out the scenario below, while the rest of your group will be "cheerleaders" who can freeze or rewind the action and suggest how to use some of the strategies we've learned to help deal with the issues the characters are facing.

You and your best friend both go on trips for the summer. Your trip is fun, but when you check your friend's feed it seems like s/he's always having an amazing time, and you can't help feeling jealous.

Task Assessment Rubric: The Cheerleader Game

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources such as search engines and online databases and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	*Digital Health* use media to promote healthy and responsible online behaviour *Making and Remixing:* communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand "Understand" includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us. "Understand" also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.	*Digital Health:* show understanding of concepts relating to life balance and digital health understand the dynamics of digital stress and how it affects all of the people involved *Consumer Awareness:* understand how some online platforms encourage unhealthy behaviours through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) show an understanding of the issues through their creative work *Making and Remixing:* show an understanding of the forms and techniques of the medium and genre: the chosen topic, issue and solution were clear the product displayed an insight into a topic and opinion	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Create "Create" is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	*Digital Health* create a creative work that effectively promotes healthy online behaviour *Making and Remixing:* contribute to project teams to produce original works or solve problems interact, collaborate, co-construct content and publish with peers, experts or others employing a variety of digital environments and media effectively apply the forms and techniques of the medium and genre	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)