

## From Distress to *DE-STRESS*

by Mark Katz, PhD

**MANY STUDENTS WITH ADHD** and learning disabilities try hard yet continue to experience ongoing failure and frustration at school. How do they adapt to what can be a very stressful predicament?

At least some will behave in ways that divert attention from situations that can lead to further shame and public embarrassment, says clinical neuropsychologist Jerome Schultz. “We tend to see these behaviors as oppositional, but for many students they may actually be protective.” We are wired to survive, Schultz reminds us, and our nervous system equips us with different response options to gain a sense of control over situations we perceive as stressful. For students who see no visible means of escape from tasks at which they feel unable to succeed, acting out diverts attention from the underlying problem, Schultz explains, “that the student feels stupid and doesn’t want to be caught with his competence down—yet again!”

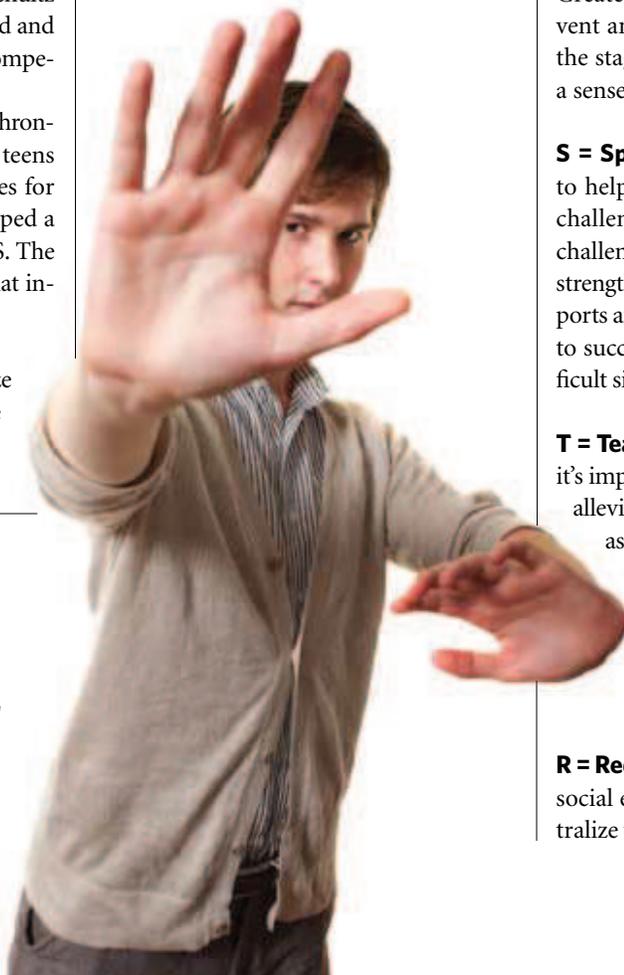
Schultz has studied the impact of chronic stress exposure on children and teens with ADHD and learning disabilities for some time. In the process he developed a model he feels can help: *DE-STRESS*. The name of the model is an acronym that includes the following components:

**D = Define.** The first step is to analyze and understand the student’s unique learning profile. This includes a comprehensive assessment to help define

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ADHD and LD characteristics, and how they may be impacting school performance, not only academically, but also behaviorally, socially and emotionally. This step also includes defining unique strengths. Schultz sees his model as asset-based. Challenges are defined clearly, but viewed within the context of a student’s unique strengths

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**E = Educate.** The next step is to help the student answer the question, *How does ADHD and LD impact my schoolwork and my life?* This step also involves educating family members, teachers and other important people in the student’s life about the student’s unique learning profile and needs. Schultz invokes the Latin aphorism *Veritas vos liberabit* (the truth shall make you free). He believes every student has the right to know the name others have given to the problems they experience at school. And, he adds, only by understanding the nature of the underlying conditions and the many different tools and strategies that can help remediate and help the student navigate around them (discussed in the following steps), can we improve a student’s ability to succeed. Greater self-understanding helps to prevent and reduce stress at school and sets the stage for experiences that can lead to a sense of mastery.

**S = Speculate.** At this point the goal is to help students learn how to anticipate challenges in advance, how to see these challenges in the context of their unique strengths, and how to identify specific supports and accommodations they may need to successfully navigate around these difficult situations.

**T = Teach.** Since knowledge brings power, it’s important for students to learn ways to alleviate and manage stress, to accurately assess performance, and to learn from their mistakes. They must also have multiple opportunities to practice specific strategies designed to maximize success experiences and minimize frustration.

**R = Reduce Threat.** Creating learning and social environments that remove or neutralize threats so that the student feels safe

is an important key to holding stress at bay. When students are taught how to recognize situations that trigger stress, they gain a sense of control over their environment that stops a stress response in its tracks.

**E = Exercise.** Research shows that regular rigorous physical activity built into a student's day reduces stress which leads to improved learning.

**S = Success.** Providing students with repeated opportunities to experience success builds a sense of confidence that replaces even deeply rooted feelings of self-doubt.

**S = Strategies.** The second S in the model emphasizes the importance of drawing upon previous lessons learned regarding the relationship between stress and ADHD/LD. When students can do this independently, they can consciously and purposefully employ strategies that pave the road to success in school and in the community.

#### Helping students save FASE

Schultz employs another acronym, FASE—*frustration, anxiety, stress, and escape*—to capture the common cycle he observes among many students with unrecognized ADHD and LD. Until we create a school day that provides these students with experiences that teach them that their actions can result in successful outcomes, says Schultz, they may not show the progress they, their teachers and their parents are hoping for. More importantly, perhaps, he believes there are potentially harmful neurological side effects that can accompany exposure to the chronic stress many of these students endure.

The DE-STRESS model was created to remedy this. Among its other benefits, Schultz says, the DE-STRESS approach can help struggling students with ADHD and LD save FASE, and prevent future exposure to potentially harmful stressful experiences at school. Providing students with experiences that consistently demonstrate the consequence of working “smart” in addition to working hard helps them develop the sense that they can be successful not only in school, but in life beyond the classroom.

Readers interested in learning more about Schultz's model are referred to the CHADD

website for instructions on how to purchase an audiotope of his presentation at the 23rd Annual CHADD Conference in Orlando, Florida (See SC9: *STRESS! Why the Brains of Students with Learning Disabilities/ADHD are At Risk and What You Can Do About It—NOW!*). Schultz also

describes his model, along with a number of other strategies for children, teens, parents, teachers and other school personnel in his recently published book, *Nowhere to Hide: Why Kids with ADHD and LD Hate School and What We Can Do About It* (Jossey-Bass, 2011). **A**

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