

## YOUR SCHOOLS

# Kids learning to COPE with stress

By [Encarnacion Pyle](#)

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Nothing gets 14-year-old Lyle Watters' stomach tied up in knots as much as when his mom and stepdad argue.

Wennona Taylor, 14, worries about getting good grades and whether the kids at her middle school like her.

And Jordan Sharp, 13, gets the jitters when his parents watch him play sports or people on the sidelines yell at the coaches or referees.



ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

Teri Eldridge of Huntington Middle School is teaching 100 eighth-graders.

But instead of allowing these situations to freak them out, all three eighth-graders at Huntington Middle School in Chillicothe have learned ways to deal with stress, as part of a new program.

Created by Bernadette Melnyk, the dean of Ohio State University's College of Nursing, the program teaches students to turn the negative thoughts from difficult situations into positive ones to improve how they feel about themselves and act toward others.

The ultimate goal of COPE — Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment — is to give kids the skills to deal with anxiety and depression before they become serious problems. It's especially important, Melnyk said, to do this in areas of the country where mental-health screening and counseling are limited.

"We need to do something before another tragic school shooting occurs," she said, referring to the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December that killed 20 children and six adults.

Much of the national attention since then has focused on gun control, arming school guards and teaching teachers tactical maneuvers to take down a school gunman, she said. What's lacking, Melnyk said, are programs that give young people get help before they turn to violence.

The great thing about COPE is that it can be taught by anyone — school counselors, nurses or teachers, said Terri Eldridge, a language-arts teacher at Huntington Middle School who taught the program to 100 sixth-graders in the fall and is now leading 100 eighth-graders through it.

"We help students understand the signs of stress," Eldridge said. "And we teach them healthy coping techniques such as breathing deeply, exercising, imagining themselves in one of their favorite places or seeking out the help of family and friends."

During a session last week, Eldridge lit two candles, turned off the lights and asked the 12 eighth-graders in her class to take their shoes off. She

then led them through a series of stretches and yoga positions, emphasizing that exercise is good for letting off steam.

She also walked the students through the foods they need to eat every day and showed them how to read the nutrition labels on their favorite McDonald's meals.

"I think it is naive of us as adults to assume that kids don't have a lot to deal with," Eldridge said.

One in four adolescents has a mental-health problem, Melnyk, said. But fewer than 25 percent receive any treatment, largely because of inadequate screening and identification by medical doctors.

She knows from personal experience.

When Melnyk was 15, her mom sneezed and died of an aneurysm that ruptured in her brain right in front of her. After that, she couldn't sleep, was jittery and had trouble concentrating. She said their family doctor wrote a prescription for Valium and told her she'd be fine.

"I remember taking one Valium and feeling very groggy the next morning and deciding that I wouldn't take any more," she said.

Over the next four years, Melnyk lost a cousin to a motorcycle accident, her only remaining grandparent died, and her father had a heart attack. Melnyk said she struggled with post-traumatic-stress disorder for several years before it was diagnosed. It's because of those experiences that Melnyk went into nursing and is interested in helping children.

She hopes to expand the COPE program to schools throughout central Ohio and the state.

Besides the usual stress of puberty and being in middle school, some of Eldridge's students are dealing with divorced parents. Others have witnessed violence in the home, including one whose mother was stabbed to death. A few have been placed in foster homes. And others have lost family members.

"I've had two girls who both lost their mothers within the past year — one to illness, the other drugs — who have become friends because of the common bond they shared in class," Eldridge said.

And she doesn't think that the children in her school struggle with anything different from those elsewhere.

Many of the students said they wish their parents could take the class.

"It might help them deal with their own stress," said Zach Dalton, 13. "And it might help them think about how their stress affects us."

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