

Stress: Not the big bad wolf everyone thinks it is

By Wilco Tymensen

Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Wilco Tymensen, Superintendent for Horizon School Division No. 67 and was published on February 8, 2017. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

When you open a newspaper or go online, you see a plethora of stories of people struggling with mental health and get the sense that society has a growing mental health crisis. As part of our school authority's focus on reducing the stigma of mental health I had the fortune to hear Dr. Peter Jensen, a sport psychologist for the Canadian Olympic team for the last nine games. Dr. Jensen spoke about channeling stress into growth and development rather than removing stress, which seems to be the current focus within society.

As I look within our schools, I see many examples where peoples' efforts to remove stress has resulted in negative consequences. For example, as students approach high stakes exams they utilize avoidance strategies. While this may work temporarily, each time the student approaches an exam their anxiety level increases more than the time before. For some, this exponential increase in anxiety over time becomes debilitating. Teachers too feel stressed, and there is a current focus on reducing workload as a stress avoidance strategy.

Dr. Jensen spoke about the need to build efficacy and resiliency, employing strategies that allow us to bounce back from adversity. We know from our athletes' experiences that time management alone does not bring about Olympic medals. We have all seen world champions choke under pressure. Yet, through awareness and training, we know that individuals can channel and reframe their stress. Dr. Jensen spoke about the importance of sleep and how individuals can use imagery to center one's mind, emotions, and body. By taking a second to become aware of our body, focusing on our breathing, and engaging in positive self-talk we can lower our stress and stop the mind from wandering into the negative. Dr. Jensen's message was that avoidance and reduction of workload is not the answer. We need to stop focusing on our thermometer (measuring stress) and start focusing on our thermostat (controlling how we lower our stress). We need to stop engaging in ceaseless striving where we apply energy where no amount of effort will help. Life is filled with stressful events. Stress is not bad. It means we care and believe we can influence the outcome. We need to act when we can make a difference and let go when we can't. We need to focus on increasing our efficacy and learn to channel the stress and manage it in order to leverage our potential for action, performance, and achievement.