Optimism and Stress
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At Aspire if an individual is enrolled in a social group, Excursions program, young adult relationship group, career internship or summer camp three areas are addressed: Self-Awareness, Social Competency and Stress Management. It is our belief that it is never too early to begin helping our participants to develop knowledge and skills in each of these three core areas. Each of these areas is considered a cornerstone to a positive quality of life that is filled with meaningful successes and joys.

No matter how much we want to protect our children from the stressors of life we cannot eliminate them. Stress is a part of life and it is actually a positive factor that keeps us safe and alert. However, stress is often interpreted negatively. At Aspire we reframe stress as a part of life and not to be viewed with resistance and dread. This is the first of many reframes that are necessary in moving our participants forward on their life journey. Each and every one of us experiences stress; it is how we view it and what we do with it that matters. Since stress is a part of life and it is what we do with it that matters then the earlier we begin to foster the development of optimism and resilience the better of our participants will be. Optimism isn't viewing the world through “rose-colored glasses” instead it is a way of thinking, a way of viewing or interpreting the causes of the setbacks, stressors and difficulties in our lives.

Optimistic people typically have better psychological and physical health. Don’t we all want that?! Optimistic people use a range of effective positive coping strategies when setbacks/stress happens. Optimistic people use acceptance, humor, problem solving, and reframing and feel they have fewer barriers to fulfill their goals. Many individuals diagnosed with ASD have a pessimistic view of the world that is often personal, permanent, and pervasive. A pessimist says or thinks, “I am stupid!” An optimist says or thinks, “Algebra is hard for me. I’m much better at Chemistry.” A pessimist thinks or says things like this: “I’ll never get an A! An optimist says or thinks, “If I studied more and went in for extra help I might get a better grade.” An optimist says, “I’ll never amount to anything.” An optimistic says this, “A C grade is okay given the work I did.” Helping our participants change their thinking can make a huge difference in their outlook towards life.

We want our participants to develop a healthier self-belief, self-efficacy and style of interacting with the world and themselves. In all our programs the first goal is to have fun and feel valued and respected. Since all of us demonstrate strengths and weaknesses we emphasize a positive approach towards the whole person as well as interpreting their lives and their setbacks. Don’t you want this for your son, daughter, student or self? Then bring our three core areas of self-awareness, stress management and social competence to all you do as they are paramount to developing and improving optimism and resilience in our participants. At Aspire we facilitate our participants in changing their attributions and beliefs regarding themselves, their resiliency and the stressors in their life. By modeling optimistic thinking as well as a different way of thinking about stressors/setbacks we encourage our participants to do the same.
At Aspire we use explicit and implicit teaching in nurturing optimism in our participants. Many of them are easily transferred to the home or school setting or to use with oneself. We employ techniques such as: having the participants identify their highs/lows, identify something/someone they are grateful for; identify a time they demonstrated kindness/compassion, and identify when they felt someone being kind/compassionate to them. We also use humor as a way to help our participants experience joy and laughter and realize that everything isn’t as “important” as they might think. Positive affirmations also play an important role in developing optimism. We typically go through our day attending to the negatives by shifting our thinking/attention to the positive we improve our optimistic thinking.

A powerful step in developing self-awareness, stress management and social competence is helping our participants know what stress feels like in their bodies, looks like and sounds like. Appropriately managing one’s stress influences all aspects of one’s life. To this end we provide our participants with a range of instruction related to stress, stress management tools, relaxation techniques, and stress thinking strategies. Depending upon the age and program the participant is enrolled in he/she receives varying amounts and types of stress instruction. Multiple methods and techniques are used including: role playing, video modeling, TV analysis and cognitive picture rehearsal. Cognitive picture rehearsal is a visual representation of the “faulty thinking” and a “redo” so that an optimistic thinking explanation can be demonstrated with an optimistic problem solving strategy to the stressor. Relaxation methods taught include: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, and yoga amongst others. Specific thinking techniques include: reframing the event and thinking when faced with a stressor, the use of humor, cognitive-behavioral techniques of transforming the negative self-talk towards more positive self-talk, problem solving thinking strategies, specific language scripts and visual images, amongst others. Technology and biofeedback techniques are also employed with our teens and young adults in some of our programs. Our hope is that through our programs, methods and techniques we facilitate the growth of our participants in our three core areas as well as moving from being a pessimistic thinker towards a more optimistic thinker.