Amorphous Empty Body

Instructions – adapt for group or individual use. *What you speak to students is in italics.* Adapt the language for the developmental stage of your group.

Read through the instructions first to be ready to lead the students in the activity.

What you'll need:

- The handout of the "empty" body
- If possible, colored pencils, crayons or felt pens, but just pencils will work
- Soft music you can play during one part of the activity – this is optional, but helpful

Step One: Have them draw using the "empty body" template:

"All of us have stress sometimes. We might feel anxious we might feel scared, and lots of different kinds of situations can cause this. Imagine this is your body. Let's close our eyes for just a moment and notice the places you hold stress." (Pause.) *"Take a moment now to let yourself focus on where you hold stress. Where do you feel it? What color is it?* (Paulse.) *"Open your eyes. Use this template to draw a representation that is true for you."*

When they're done coloring in the stress points, suggest that they label each one. *"If you have stress that is just a bit of a bother, that might equal one. If something is stressful so much that it is hard to concentrate in school or enjoy life, that is definitely a five! Mark each place where you drew stress so we can see where you hold big stress and where you hold smaller stresses."*

Step Two: Have them notice and share/express

There are several questions you might pose. Amend as seems appropriate for the student age and comfort. This could be for whole class, small groups, dyads or individuals:

- Look at the picture together or – if in a group and are comfortable -- have them lay out their pictures for others to see. *"What do you notice about how we hold our stress similarly or differently?"* You might suggest they not put their names on their pictures because they're going to share them and look at each other's drawings.
- If you expect they won't want to share their artwork, just ask questions or make statements that invite them to engage. One way to help kids be willing to join the conversation is to make them the expert. Instead of asking what they think or feel, ask them what they think kids might think or feel so they don't feel like they're self-disclosing, but rather sharing insights:

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- *"How do you think stress affects us when we're doing schoolwork?"*
- *"What are the kinds of events that might make students stressed out or anxious?"*
- *"One way we learn to manage stress is to recognize what we've done that helped in the past and add new insights or strategies. What do you notice kids your age doing that works for them?"*

- (For older students) "*What are some of the ways teens try to manage stress that is harmful or maybe not safe?*" Ask questions to help them identify self-medicating with drugs or alcohol may be a temptation, but that prevents us from learning better how to manage our stress ourselves. *"If kids use alcohol to get calm, that won't work when they are going to take a test, but they can use stress reduction activities or strategies anywhere. It gives us control we don't otherwise have."*
- Lead students in generating a list of healthy coping skills for anxiety or stress. You could have two columns going – one for external activities, one for internal stress management, such as:

Internal techniques	External techniques
• *"Breathe in to a slow count of four. Hold your breath for a count of four, exhale slowly to a count of four, hold breath out to count of four."* • Deep, intentional belly breathing • Mindfulness • Imagine growing roots from hands and feet down into the ground	• Hot bath • Hot tea • Soothing music • Talking with someone trusted • Put small things in your pocket that you can hold to help you feel more connected to a safe place. Could be any kind of little trinket.

Step Three: Practice strategies

Next instructions*: "Now we're going to practice a stress reduction exercise. We do this with our eyes closed so it feels safe for everyone. We'll do that in a moment. When we're ready, we'll all take one last look at our pictures and, if you indicated more than one area where you hold stress or anxiety, decide on one area to focus for this activity.*

"OK. Look at the picture you drew and focus on one stress-holding area. Now close your eyes, and I'm going to just speak to yourself in a quiet voice and suggest how you could breathe into that place and decrease your stress or anxiety. It is just as simple as that. And there will be moments when [it will just be silent in the room] [you will just hear the music] and you'll continue to keep your eyes closed and continue with the breathing. I'll tell you when it is time to open our eyes."

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[Pause and make sure music will be easy to start.] *"Get comfortable, have your back straight, and just take a deep breath in* (pause) *and, as you exhale, just relax."* [You might exhale with the sound of a sigh to help them relax. Instruct for two more breaths.].

"Now when you inhale this time, imagine that the space where you hold the most stress is a big chunk of chocolate. When you breathe in this time, imagine you're breathing in all the warmth of the sunshine, and imagine that it is melting some of the chocolate. It just melts away. Or maybe it works for you to imagine that stress as being like a lump of soap, and when you blow on it, bubbles come up and just disappear above you, carrying off some of the stress. Just floats off into space. As each one floats away, your stress calms down a notch.

Continue with that image with each breath, whatever image works for you, and let this calm music help us relax even more." Let students continue for maybe three or four minutes. If you sense they're restless, you might continue your narration through the whole time. And then, *"Now in two more breaths, we're going to open our eyes and rejoin the room."*

Step Four:
"Now, check in with your body and see how it feels. Focus on that area where you were breathing in warmth or blowing bubbles. How would you rate your stress in that area now? Has the number changed?" You could invite students to share in their pairs/groups or with you if individual.

If you have more time:
"Let's take this a step further." (If you have colored writing implements) "*See if you can envision a way of showing on your picture how you are melting the stress. It might be yellow rays from the sun, or it might be something else. Now see if you can envision an image that could represent how you are melting your stress away. It could be drawing a sun near your body and drawing the rays coming in to melt your stress. Can you draw the image you used to help calm your inner self?"* Give students time to share in pairs/groups or with you individually.

Parting thought: End your time with students by inviting them to identify the times in their lives they could use this technique daily so they can become increasingly skilled at managing stress or anxiety. Then invite them to think of times they could use it on the spot because something is causing anxiety (like right before a test or when speaking in front of the class).

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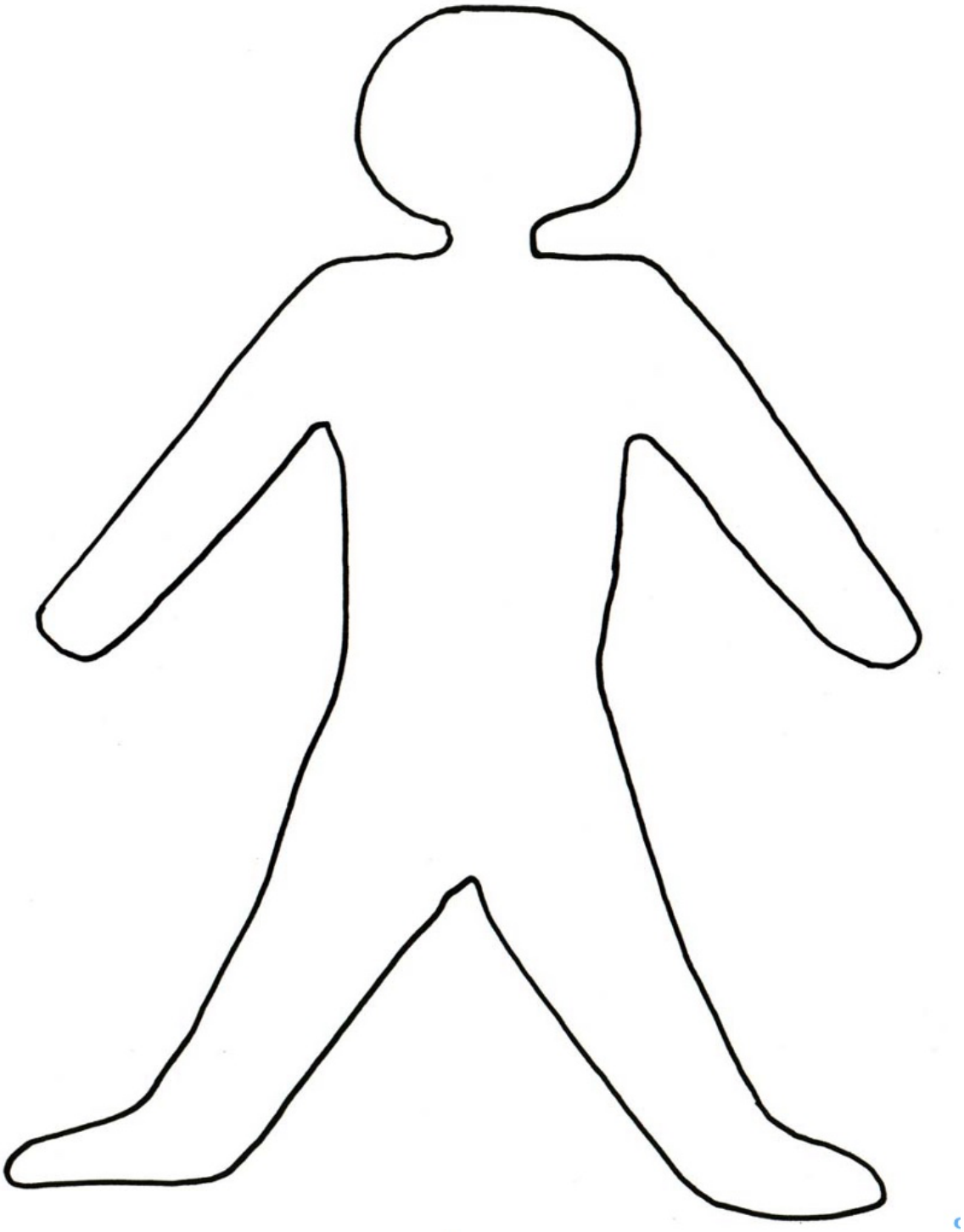

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