

campus life

Loving yourself means taking good care of yourself, but equally that doesn't mean letting yourself do whatever you want. These were just a few words of wisdom heard by Yew Chung International School Year 13s this month at a special session designed to address sources and triggers of stress.

Social worker and counsellor Cyril Chung, who led the talk, told the students, "you have a lot of unavoidable responsibilities, but you can manage them."

We all experience stress and pressure – it's just a case of learning how to manage it

At the start of the session, each student was given a questionnaire to fill out, asking questions such as "how often do you feel tired for no good reason?", "how often did you feel hopeless?", or "how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?" For each question, students had to score themselves on how they felt over the previous 30 days on a six-point scale ranging from "none of the time" to "some of the time" to "all of the time".

At the bottom of the page, the final question asked what the students

felt were the main causes of stress in their lives, with tick boxes alongside words such as "coursework", "family", "friends and peers", and "future".

All information provided was kept confidential, but the school councillor and social workers would read and assess each one and give them a score. Those who answered a lot of questions with "most" or "all the time" got a higher score, and may be invited for counselling to discuss what they find stressful.

The school's counselling and learning support coordinator, Lesley Cooke, said most scores on the stress screener came out at moderate to average. A few students had come out as "severe", meaning they will be offered individual counselling. Exams, family relationships and dealing with parents' expectations were all flagged as some of the most stressful issues for students.

"We underestimated the effect of family," said Cooke. She explained that parents can contribute to stress by putting their son or daughter under pressure to perform well, but might also be affecting their child's mental health by not providing enough

opportunities for a heart-to-heart on issues like school or family.

The form asked for the student's name but, Cooke says, not everyone chose to give theirs. "We try our best to offer support to those struggling, but you can't force someone to speak up."

The morning session was part of a series of health talks aimed at the whole school. They are targeted at Year 13 students taking the IB and Year 11s doing their iGCSEs because they are going through some of the toughest academic years.

The students watched a short, quirky animated video about the effects of stress on the body, and how to deal with it. Feeling stressed releases chemicals that stop the immune system doing its job properly, which means you are more likely to get ill. As for dealing with stressful situations, the video advised taking a warm bath or shower to boost your mood and help you stay relaxed.

There were other relaxation techniques, too. If stressing about deadlines or unfinished work is affecting your sleep by keeping you awake at night, try clenching

every single muscle in your body and then slowly letting go. Repeat this technique until all muscles are relaxed.

Regular solitude is also important to mitigate anxiety, so turn off your electronic devices and make the time to relax, the students heard. If you feel your heart rate begin to speed up during a last-minute cram session, practise some simple stretching. Yoga also de-stresses the mind and helps stave off anxiety. Another useful tactic is appealing to your sense of smell using aromatherapy – scents like mint and lavender have both been shown to promote relaxation.

"Everyone experiences stress and pressure – it's just a case of learning how to manage it," says

Cooke, who is part of the school's three-branch student support services network. She believes that having a strong support network of trusted friends and family is vital to minimising stress levels when exams roll round.

"Looking after students' mental health and building a sense of community are priorities at YCIS."

When it feels like you're isolated in a bubble of woe, don't turn to social media – arrange to meet up with friends instead of messaging them. In the same vein, it's important to be caring and attentive when you know one of your friends is going through a rough patch. Keeping stress levels down round the clock requires incorporating these strategies into your routine – make them as normal as breathing.

To the students, Cooke says: "Life is going to knock you down and make you frustrated ... but we'll help you get back up again."



Left: YCIS Year 13s learn how stress affects the body. Below from left: the CALST team Panda Lee, Lesley Cooke, Christine Wong and Cyril Chung. Photos: YCIS



Tackle stress together

Students at YCIS got some helpful hints and tips that will benefit anyone feeling under pressure, writes Lauren James

