



From Chaos to Coherence: Managing Teacher Stress

"I'm totally stressed out." Listen carefully when teachers repeat that almost-routine mantra. They could be experiencing stress that affects their performance, students, and personal lives. But, stress doesn't have to take a toll.

High stakes exams. Demanding administrators. Challenging students. No wonder teachers are stressed! On a daily basis, those circumstances can challenge teachers to do their jobs well -- or even overwhelm them.

Stress is physiological: it negatively affects the way the brain and the nervous system operate. Critical cognitive processes -- the ones that normally help people manage conflict -- become impaired, resulting in an "inner noise."

That "inner noise" leads to memory loss, the inability to solve problems, and the absence of creativity, among critical coping mechanisms, according to Drs. Rollin McCraty and Robert A. Rees of the Institute of HeartMath. (See their Web site, [Institute of HeartMath](#).)

Couple those impairments with stress's physical and emotional effects -- such as headaches, irritability, and depression -- and you find a teacher who is emotionally spent and professionally ineffective.

Stress heavily strains teachers' "pro-social emotion"-- compassion and empathy, added Dr. Margaret Kemeny, professor in psychiatry at the University of California in San Francisco. "Teachers want to keep giving until they reach 'compassion exhaustion'," said Kemeny.

STRESS MANIFESTED

"Stressed teachers affect their environment, both personal and professional," said McCraty. "Often, they are exhausted from lack of sleep and overwork, which has an impact on their preparation, their class demeanor, and their relationships with others in school."

Students especially respond to stress. "What we see from research is that students sense teacher stress and react to it," explained Dr. Liza Nagel, associate professor of health education at the University of New Mexico. "Sometimes, the reaction is exactly what the teacher does not need: acting out," Nagel added.

How do teachers "manage" stress? Some reach out to friends or family, or they exercise; those are among some of the recommended positive activities. Others resort to less productive methods, like social separation, overeating, and compulsive activities.

TAPPING INTO INNER STRENGTH

Linda Lantieri, founder of [Project Renewal](#), a program that helps educators tackle trauma and adversity, said that even teachers who experience "compassion fatigue" have an inner resilience that enables them to handle stress. The right methodologies and tools -- including those that allow teachers to get in touch with their mind, body, and spirit -- can help them do that. Such strategies, added Rees, not only help teachers; they help change a school's overall climate for the better. "The sustained use of those tools usually not only produces a qualitative shift in an organization's social and emotional climate, but also favorably affects other important indicators of organizational success," he said.

There are a variety of proven-effective stress reduction methods teachers can use. For example, Nagel has introduced teachers to self-reflection, cognitive restructuring (turning negativity around), meditation, massage, and exercise, among several strategies she underscores in her article, [The ABCs of Teacher Stress](#).

HeartMath's Resilient Educator™ program helps teachers move from "chaos to coherence," explained Rees. Teachers begin to understand what stress is -- emotional reactions that turn into turmoil and then performance blocks -- and engage in "positive emotion refocusing techniques" that help teachers build positive energy and responses to challenges and alter stress' physiological impact.

In the absence of such sophisticated measures, teachers and administrators can themselves reduce stress in school. Nagel suggests that teachers find satisfaction in the rewards their profession brings, like successfully integrating parents into the classroom setting or acknowledging the one challenging child who has learned to value concepts

Manifestations Of Teacher Stress

- Physical, then emotional, exhaustion
- Short fuses -- impatience, irritability, and anger -- with students and colleagues
- Repression of feelings
- Lethargy
- Depression
- General lack of resiliency
- More frequent absences
- No sense of humor
- Difficulty being organized
- No time to listen to anyone
- Frequent illness

being taught.

Nagel believes that an administrator must understand his or her role in teacher stress;

and then change that impact by practicing "participatory leadership and supporting teachers" when they need help. "One simple way to show support," said Nagel, " is to use teacher in-service days to teach or reinforce skills that will have a positive impact on school climate: stress management, conflict management, communication skills, skills for working with parents," she described.

Lantieri recommends that administrators put time into teacher schedules for professional development that addresses stress or offers strategies for teachers to maintain an inner calm. Or, to provide a quiet space, other than the teacher lounge, where teachers can find silence and respite during the school day, or where they can enjoy soothing activities, like listening to music or drawing.

"Our recommendation would be that every school district have specific, proven programs for reducing stress and for helping administrative, teaching, and support staff manage stress and improve communication and problem solving skills," urged McCraty.

Nagel highly recommends that teachers take the advice of "the famous American philosopher" Dolly Parton: "Nobody's gonna live for ya," so ensuring your mental health is a priority. "Find time for exercise and meditation," she advised. "Avoid the toxic influences in your life. Recognize that stress is a perception and you have control of your perceptions."

RESOURCES

Seeking expert stress-reduction guidance? These programs and resources can help teachers and administrators implement stress-reduction initiatives and strategies in their schools.

[Project Renewal](#)

Founded by Linda Lantieri, Project Renewal helps teachers physically, mentally, and emotionally replenish themselves by developing their inner resources for resilience. The program offers teachers around the country day-long and seasonal residential retreats and after- and in-school programs, yoga classes, and individual stress-reduction sessions from certified bodywork practitioners.

Coping With Stress: Tips for Educators

Before educators can help students cope with their problems and be ready to learn, they must first take time to care for themselves, says Dr. Leah Davis. The following are ways educators can take control of their lives and manage their own stress so that they will be available to assist their students.

Make a list of things that you enjoy doing that are good for you. Arrange to do one a day.

Write down how you see yourself a year, five years, or ten years from now. Share your ideas and goals with someone you trust.

Write down at least five of your worries. Rank order your list by their importance in your life. By each worry write *Accept*, *Change*, or *Reject*. For each worry decide what your first step will be toward accepting, changing or rejecting it. Carry out the steps you listed.

For additional tips, see Dr. Leah Davies' column, [Coping with Stress - Tips For Educators](#). Ideas above were shared with Dr. Davies' permission.

[Mind and Life Institute](#)

Dr. Margaret Kemeny is the principle investigator of Cultivating Emotional Balance, a research project designed to teach and evaluate the impact of meditation combined with emotional-regulation-strategies training on teachers' emotional lives. The study, now in its pilot phase in the San Francisco Bay area, tests whether Eastern philosophy and meditation can bolster teachers' capacities for empathy and compassion.

[The Institute of HeartMath's Resilient Educator™](#)

This program teaches teachers around the country scientifically-validated tools and strategies proven to stop the negative impact of stress -- mentally, emotionally, and physically. Among the things teachers do: learn about the concept of resiliency within an educational context; identify areas of stress and areas of well being in their professional lives; and implement the stress-reducing strategies they have acquired.

Article by Michele Israel
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