

# Stress Management

Teaching has long been recognized as one of the five most stressful occupations. It is interesting to note the most stressful jobs frequently involve work with people or require you to hide your emotions. In combining these two, teaching carries a high degree of emotional labor and with that stress.

Researchers report signs of teacher stress include: being tired, frustrated, overwhelmed and irritable and bringing problems home.

A Utah State University survey of recent studies of teacher stress shows that many identified stressors appear consistently and may be subsumed under the general domains of environmental and personality based stressors. Environmental stressors include student discipline and attitude problems, teacher competence, and teacher-administrator relations. Additional stressors include accountability laws, large classes, low salaries, intense pupil dependence, and declining community support. Sources of personality-induced stressors relate to one's self-perception. Negative self-perception, negative life experiences, low morale, and a struggle to maintain personal values and standards in the classroom all take their toll (Goodman, 1980; Schnacke, 1982; Schwanke, 1981).

## How much stress is too much?

Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. Some people roll with the punches, while others crumble at the slightest obstacle or frustration. Some people even seem to thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships, your general outlook on life, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

## Things that influence your stress tolerance level

- **Your support network** – A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Your sense of control** – If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. People who are vulnerable to stress tend to feel like things are out of their control.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Stress-hardy people have an optimistic attitude. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, accept that change is a part of life, and believe in a higher power or purpose.
- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or afraid. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity.
- **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

# Stress Management - Ways to Relieve Stress

The best way to manage your stress is to learn healthy coping strategies. You can start practicing these tips right away. Try one or two until you find a few that work for you. Practice these techniques until they become habits you turn to when you feel stress. You can also use this coping strategies form to see how you respond to stress.

Stress-relief techniques focus on relaxing your mind and your body.

## Ways to relax your mind

**Write.** It may help to write about things that are bothering you. Write for 10 to 15 minutes a day about stressful events and how they made you feel. Or think about starting a stress journal. This helps you find out what is causing your stress and how much stress you feel. After you know, you can find better ways to cope.

**Let your feelings out.** Talk, laugh, cry, and express anger when you need to. Talking with friends, family, a counselor, or a member of the clergy about your feelings is a healthy way to relieve stress.

**Do something you enjoy.** This can be: A hobby, such as gardening. A creative activity, such as writing, crafts, or art. Playing with and caring for pets. Volunteer work.

You may feel that you're too busy to do these things. But making time to do something you enjoy can help you relax. It might also help you get more done in other areas of your life.

**Focus on the present.** Meditation and guided imagery are two ways to focus and relax your mind. Meditate. When you meditate, you focus your attention on things that are happening right now. Paying attention to your breathing is one way to focus. For more information, see: Stress Management: Doing Meditation.

**Use guided imagery.** With guided imagery, you imagine yourself in any setting that helps you feel calm and relaxed. You can use audiotapes, books, or a teacher to guide you. To learn more, see: Stress Management: Doing Guided Imagery to Relax.

## Ways to relax your body

**Exercise.** Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage stress. Walking is a great way to get started. Even everyday activities such as housecleaning or yard work can reduce stress. Stretching can also relieve muscle tension. For more information about becoming more active, see the topic Fitness.

**Try techniques to relax.** Breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, and yoga can help relieve stress. Breathing exercises. These include roll breathing, a type of deep breathing. For more information, see: Stress Management: Breathing Exercises for Relaxation.

**Progressive muscle relaxation.** This technique reduces muscle tension. You do it by relaxing separate groups of muscles one by one. To learn more, see: Stress Management: Doing Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

**Yoga, tai chi, and qi gong.** These techniques combine exercise and meditation. You may need some training at first to learn them. Books and videos are also helpful. You can do all of these techniques at home.

## Stress Relief

Here are five stress relieving techniques:

1. Get exercise! Do NOT use the excuse that you don't have time. You must make time. Make it part of your routine every day. While it may be tough at first, you'll quickly find yourself with more energy and you'll be much more efficient at work.
2. Learn to say *no*. This can be quite difficult...especially as a new teacher. New teachers think they must say "yes" to everything in order to keep their job, but this can quickly lead to teacher burnout.
3. Join teacher discussion boards/forums. There are many teacher forums on the internet where teachers can not only vent their frustrations, but get real advice from real teachers who have experienced the same problems.
4. Think positive. In fact, don't just *think* positive thoughts, but actually *say* them out loud. In the morning, or on your way to work, say positive things about your job, about your students, about your colleagues. You'll be amazed at the impact that saying these things out loud can have on the rest of your day.
5. Cool down and take breaks. Teachers have a tendency to go straight through the day (and night) without taking a break. This is unhealthy and only adds to your stress level. Make sure to NOT work through lunch. Take that time to eat a healthy meal and talk to colleagues about things other than school. In other words let yourself take a mental break from the job during the day. Also, at the end of the school day, make a to-do list for the next day and then take ten minutes to relax and cool down with some other stress relieving techniques such as deep breathing exercises, stretching, or visualization.

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## Reducing Stress

Kathryn Lovewell's Ten Top Tips for Reducing Stress

- **Don't argue with reality.** There is no point complaining and whining if that generates additional stress for you. Remember, if you argue with reality – you'll only lose 100% of the time! A simple example – "I can't believe it's raining again!" Can you change the weather? How harmful are your thoughts, especially if you repeat them again and again. Stop! Shift your focus to healthy, helpful thoughts. This will lift your energy instantly.
- **Assess what you can influence and what you cannot.** There are certain things you can affect in your teaching life and certain things you cannot. To master the art of keeping cool in school and remaining calm in chaos, identify what you can steer and what is out of your hands. You cannot control whether Jonny wants to listen to you, you cannot control if Sid sets off the fire alarm for a laugh. The only thing you can control is your response. You can not be on top of everything. Don't expect that of yourself.

- **Take charge of yourself via your breathing.** If you are stressed, you are in a state of red alert. This is usually a recipe for confrontational exchanges, heightened emotional states and poor classroom management. Focus on your breathing to take charge of yourself. Do this before a lesson, during a difficult conversation and after a lesson. Seven slow deep breaths in followed by seven slower, deep breaths out will increase the relaxation response in your body and help you feel stronger instantly.
- **Smile.** To increase your relaxation response, take a deep breath, exhale and smile. This is my favorite technique. It is simple and no one need ever know you are using it. You can do a cheesy Wallace and Grommit grin or a subtle Mona Lisa smile - either way you will release endorphins that will help restore your sense of wellbeing. Don't stop at one. Keep breathing and smiling. You might find yourself chuckling your way to the staffroom. And you may just brighten someone else's day too when they see your smile.
- **Validate your own feelings.** Give yourself permission to feel all your feelings. Anger can drive you into action (I find I do the housework twice as fast if I'm cross) and can inspire you to stand up for justice. You are often justified to feel outraged or incensed. You may feel powerless to change it or you may be able to take healthy action. Either way, recognize what shows up, do not stuff it down. However, while you acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, you do not have to buy into them. If you feed them, they can eat you up. Instead, acknowledge and move on.
- **Identify your options.** One of the biggest causes of stress is the feeling of having no choice - that your back is against the wall, that you feel cornered. Remember, that is only stress talking. You always have choices. They may not be easy choices, but they are choices nonetheless. Be honest and assess what you can do to support yourself in that moment.
- **Talk it through.** If you are experiencing stress, especially because of bullying, talking about it can alleviate it immediately. Teacher Support Network is a starting point for personal support. Talking about issues can help you regain perspective.
- **Eat healthily.** Be kind to your body and it will hold you up during these tough times. Drink plenty of water during the day to flush out toxins. Stay on an even keel by eating regularly and healthily and avoiding depressants and stimulants. Comfort foods, alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes will add to the stress on your body while sugar will give you an empty high and a depressing low.
- **Go outside.** Leave your classroom. Go outside during break times. Get some fresh air! Leave the school grounds. Walk the dog after school. Go for a walk around the park with a friend. The action of walking releases muscle tension while extra oxygen in the brain generates clearer thoughts.

Your circumstances may be awful right now. You may not be able to change your situation, but you can change the way you perceive it and you can be the master of your thoughts and feelings. Be real. Acknowledge your current reality. Maybe keep a journal and release the anxiety or frustration. Acknowledge what is true for you and then choose to take steps towards making healthy change. Serve your heart, listen to your body and remember to breathe.

## **Coping with Stress**

While most people respond positively to some pressure, problems arise when you start to have concerns about how you will cope. So there are two elements to addressing stress: reducing the pressures on you and learning to manage them better.

There is no simple way to beat stress, but here are some tips to help you regain control of your life:

### **Recognize the problem**

The most important step is to recognize that the problem exists. Try to take a step back from your life to think about how you're feeling. If you don't have time to assess your symptoms or *stress* levels, you're probably *stressed*.

### **Take a few moments to calm down**

You can learn to deal with the underlying causes of your *stress*, both the pressures in your life and the way you react to them. If your first thought is that you don't have time to stop and review things, take a few moments to calm down.

### **Identify and deal with the causes**

Sometimes you will know intuitively what's making you *stressed*; other times it may seem like everything is going wrong and you are unable to identify the cause of your *stress*. Remember that *stress* is rarely caused by an event in itself, and more often by doubts about your ability to cope with that event. You need to be very honest with yourself and face up to issues that could cause some distress.

### **Take control of your lifestyle**

By making a change to your lifestyle you can assert control over your life and adjust the way you think about your situation. Small shifts can quickly free up creative energy and increase your options.

Different things work for different people but the important thing is to take action of some kind and find out what works best for you. Unfortunately the more *stressed*, overwhelmed and exhausted we feel, the harder it is to be proactive.

### **Here are some ideas to get you started:**

- Try listing everything that's bothering you and then work out which things you can control and which you can't. Ignore those you can't influence and work on practical solutions to the others.
- Take up a physical activity. It doesn't have to be 'exercise': a brisk, 20-minute walk daily will give you valuable breathing space.
- Muscular tension often parallels and exacerbates mental *stress*. Relaxing physically at the end of the day is important and sometimes hard to do.
- Try to avoid increasing your consumption of alcohol or caffeine. Although smoking may seem to help, it really doesn't.

- Do something that forces you to think actively about something else. Meet friends, cook a meal, do a Sudoku puzzle.
- Get a good night's sleep. Relax before you go to bed to avoid lying awake and worrying. Some people take a notebook to bed so they can make a quick note of anything worrying them!