

When Your Plate Feels Full – Choose Simplicity

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I love a good analogy. It can offer a quick way to gain insight, and bring to light aspects of our experiences that are difficult to explain. But what is a good analogy for the complex experience of being a teacher, and especially, of being a teacher in May and June? As we approach the end of the school year, things tend to “heat up,” literally and figuratively. While we welcome the temperature rising outside the building, does it sometimes feel like we’re in a pressure cooker inside the building? Yes. Does it feel like we’ve been running a marathon and may collapse from exhaustion? For sure. Do we feel like the ringmaster of our own circus? Most definitely. But we’re also the trapeze artist, tightrope walker, lion tamer, and person being shot out of a cannon through a flaming hoop, at said circus. Not my circus, not my monkeys? Not an adage that applies to the role of being a teacher—where we take responsibility for every student that enters our classroom; not only their academic development, but their social-emotional wellbeing as well.

The question is, who takes responsibility for the wellbeing of teachers? As adults, that too falls on us, and can feel like one more thing to add to the list of “things to do.” Often, we shuffle ourselves to the bottom, prioritizing everyone before ourselves, leading us at this point in the year to feeling like the frazzled teacher from the meme. But what happens when we put ourselves at the bottom of the list?

Most of us have heard the flight attendant’s monologue—when the air mask drops, we should attach our own before helping others, right? We understand that logic on an airplane. In our jobs, however, where we are susceptible to immense stress, burnout and subsequent health issues if we are not taking care of ourselves, the logic does not come as easily to accept. If we feel like we’re in a pressure cooker, how do we turn down the heat? If we feel like we’re running a marathon, how do we ensure we pace ourselves and finish the course? If we’re the ringmaster of a circus, plus take on the role of every circus performer, how do we get the help we need to keep it all balanced?

As someone who has consciously worked to manage my mental health for more than 20 years, I have learned that one thing we need to be able to do for ourselves is manage our stress, but more than that, we need to be able to self-regulate. In my family we use the analogy of a plate. If you’re feeling overly stressed,

your plate may be too full, and one way to address this is to clear something off it. That doesn’t mean avoiding that which is stressing you, but it might mean asking for help with a task so that your energy can go towards managing the stressor. It also means recognizing that we all have different sized plates, and knowing not to compare ourselves with others who seem to be able to manage “it all.” You need to know your own plate and what it feels like when it is balanced, or when it’s too heavy and may be about to tip. The first step to self-regulating is being familiar with the feeling of your own plate. According to Stuart Shanker, when we are experiencing stress in any of the five domains—biological, emotional, cognitive, social, or prosocial—we need to become stress detectives. We need to learn how to identify or recognize a stressor, learn how to reduce our stressors, and learn how to restore our energy. Or in other words, we need to look at the size

of our plate, ask what is on it, find ways to reduce the pile of “things to do”, and adopt ways to restore (or reset) our plate. As educators who are managing so much, especially in May and June, I encourage you to get to know your plate. Are you able to recognize when it is balanced, or tipping? Do you need to use a strategy to reduce a stressor by shifting priorities, drawing boundaries or asking for help? Do you have a practice that you use for closing stress cycles and resetting your plate, like going for a walk, phoning a

good friend, or soaking up the sunshine? Food for thought, as you enter the frazzled teacher chapter of the school year. And if it feels like just too much to consider right now, don’t stress, thankfully we have an in-built “reset and restore” coming up in the form of summer break. The finish line is almost here. If all else fails, employ a little positive self-talk. You got this.

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