

Experiencing Wellness on the Job

By Kathy Marshall-Cormier



Often times when the public thinks about the life of a teacher they think of short work days, plentiful vacation and decent pay. Many people do not stop and think about what a stressful career being an educator can be. Teacher stress is a serious problem that is taking its toll on educators teaching at all levels—Primary through secondary education—and needs to be taken seriously. The sources of stress that teachers experience are unique to that teacher and are dependent on the interaction between their personality, values, skills and circumstances (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Becoming educated about how stress negatively affects the body is vital to finding the appropriate strategies that will help teachers find work-life balance and take care of themselves.

Most of us enter this profession full of optimism, ready to make a positive difference in the lives of the students we teach, and in the communities in which we teach. As time goes by the constant demands of teacher accountability, large class sizes, lack of administrative and parental support, family responsibilities, poor working conditions, and many other sources of stress may eventually lead to the three components of teacher burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Striving to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of the many diverse learners in a classroom is a constant challenge that often leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed.

We need coping strategies to help deal with the constant bombardment of stressors in the workplace. Richards (2012), discussed how teachers are unable to control many of the sources of stress that they have to deal with on a daily basis such as; class size, the demographics of the school, and lack of support from administration. Richards then states that teachers can take control of their willingness to learn about, implement and practice effective coping strategies that have worked for others having dealt with similar sources of stress.

According to research, one of the most often mentioned coping strategies to deal with stress is to find time to get more physically active (Botwinik, 2007; Richards, 2012; Stewart Stanec, Formeris, & Theurekauf, 2010). Essentially, all types of exercise can act as a stress reliever. Exercise can directly reduce stress in the body by increasing the production of endorphins in the body (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2014). Stewart Stanec et al. (2010) suggest that yoga is a coping strategy that can help teachers deal with daily stressors as well as gain strength, balance and flexibility. Physical activity can provide other significant benefits to teachers in addition to stress reduction. Increasing the amount of regular physical activity appears to reduce the risk of premature death and chronic disease regardless of body mass index, though it does not negate risks associated with obesity (Zoeller, 2007).

Other useful coping strategies may be common sense but many educators do not apply these simple concepts. Teachers need to be more mindful and present as they feel the stress increasing (Abenavoli et al., 2013). They

should spend the time to get the classroom organized. We need to have a sense of humour, as well as the understanding that it is not possible to be the teacher, parent and mentor to every student. Most importantly, we need to spend time with family and friends focusing on life outside of school (Botwinik, 2007).

Suggestions for wellness

- **Healthy Habits Club** – teachers declare and maintain one healthy habit for 30 consecutive days. Once they have reached 30 days, they can put their name in a draw for a prize at the end of the year. Positive healthy habits may include drinking a set amount of water each day or getting 12,000 steps per day.
- **Walkabout Club** – participate in a walking club based on tracking daily step counts using the Heart and Stroke Walk-About program. All participants are given a pedometer to monitor their steps, and each group will be able to record their steps online.
- **Wellness Wall** – located in the staff room where teachers can post their accomplishments related to their wellness and any need for support to meet their personal goals (e.g., I need a partner to walk with on Tuesdays).
- **Mentor Teachers** – help new staff learn the ropes related to how the school operates.
- **Inspirational/Motivational Messages** – posted where staff will see them, throughout the staff room, washroom, placed in their mailboxes (read it and pass it on).
- **Create a Community of Support** – around all activities. Be mindful of competition and how some people will be less likely to participate if they feel they will be unsuccessful in comparison.
- **Post the Physical Education Schedule** – this gives

teachers an idea of when the gymnasium is empty and available for use with their colleagues or their classes.

- **Healthy Pot-Lucks** – Teachers love these days. Sharing a meal with each other can be a stress reducer in itself. Have a theme for more fun and schedule two to three times a year on a Professional Development (PD) day.
- **Healthy Snack Days** – these should be offered at least one to two times per month on a signup basis with rotating days to ensure that all specialists on a circuit have an opportunity to participate.
- **Cooking Classes With a Licensed Nutritionist** – these will probably have to take place off-site due to the lack of necessary equipment. This could be held at a local grocery store in their community rooms.
- **Massage at School** – invite students training to become massage therapists into the school on a PD day and schedule teachers who are interested for a twenty minute massage.
- **Flu Shots at School** – it can be difficult to get the entire family to the doctor for a scheduled appointment in a flu clinic. Have a pharmacist come into the school and offer the flu shot to teachers and their families. A signup sheet will be needed to schedule times.

Teaching is a stressful profession with many difficult challenges on a daily basis. Having practical strategies available to help teachers manage work related stress is just as important as staying current with best practices.

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