

# Stress and How to Combat that Feeling...

by Diana Dibblee

**STRESS.** We are living in stressful times in education. Are you experiencing stress (does the word strike and job action cause anxiety)? If you are feeling overwhelmed and have a lot on your plate right now, know you are not alone. What can you do?

After having consulted with many teachers over my 20+ year career, I find that there is no easy answer when it comes to the best way to deal with stress. However, there are wonderful strategies that many use successfully, on a regular basis. Here are some ideas you just might want to try...

**1. Seeksupport.** Talk to your family and trusted friends to help you deal with your stress. Sometimes having a friend or partner just listen, really listen and hear your concerns may help to relieve some of the weight on your shoulders. Sharing your challenges with other teachers is a good release of stress, connect with each other; we are all in the same boat! If you want psychological support, seek out the counsellors at the NSTU or privately with support from the Resilience program. Learn to communicate your needs and get the help that you need.

**2. Quiet the mind.** Make some time for you (with no guilt attached, even five minutes). Seek out a quiet space at home where you are able to find quality time to just relax! Breathe in deeply, listen to

your body and quiet your busy mind. Focus on simple breathing in and out. There are great apps out there, for relaxing, mindfulness and meditation.

**3. Exercise.** Get outside and go for a walk in the forest, a nearby park or any green space. The link between being outside and mental health is well documented; physical health positively impacts our state of mind. Working out, getting involved in sports or doing any physical activity you enjoy, is beneficial and may decrease your stress levels, especially if you can do it outdoors!

**4. Eat healthy, balanced meals.** Treats are great and can be enjoyed occasionally but remember that you are fueling your body AND your mind with the food you eat and drink. As a dietitian, I strive for 7-8 vegetables and fruit a day. Choose nutritious snacks and simple, easy to make real meals. Drink water, try to keep 2 bottles on your desk (spice them up with lemon, lime or other fruit). If you need ideas or recipes, go to [www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca) for more information and find a local dietitian at the Dietitians Network of Nova Scotia website ([www.dietitiansns.com](http://www.dietitiansns.com)).

**5. Go for it.** Plan fun, easy activities and different events each month. What do you like to do? Go bowling, attend a paint event, have your own dance party, try an intro yoga class, learn to

knit; choose something new and enjoy it. This may help you to temporarily forget the stress (laughter is the best medicine) and put things into perspective. Ask yourself, what is the big picture? Focus on what really matters (health, relationships etc.).

**6. Practice self care.** Remember teachers have great health insurance that supports regular visits to massage therapists, physiotherapists, osteopaths, (visit a spa for a day) along with other health professionals. Several massage therapists do home visits, they direct bill. It is simple and easy; you don't have to leave the house! Stress can appear to melt away, or at least it feels like it, when you are relaxed and well taken care of.

**7. Simplify every-day tasks.** For example, try to create a separation between home and work life. Pick a time to turn off your technology, don't check your work email and try to reconnect to the moment (instead of thinking of the past or future). Be gentle with yourself and try not to dwell on things that you cannot control. Life can be stressful and challenging but strive to maintain a positive attitude and try not to complicate things.

**8. Sleep.** Finally, try to get enough sleep every night. Dealing with stress is challenging on a good day, but if you are tired, it can become overwhelming. Have

a bubble bath, read a good book, visualise positive thoughts; do whatever you can to forget about your stressors before you go to sleep.

These are some of the ways that we have learned to combat stress in our lives. I am sure you have others and I encourage you to share your ideas with your fellow teachers, given our current state of flux. We all experience the ups and downs of life. The NSTU and the supports they provide are here to help. A reminder that there is always a nurse on duty to answer any questions and if needed, point you in the right direction for greater supports.

Try to stay positive in these challenging times and know that you are not alone. Be thankful to your supportive friends and family and know "that this, too, shall pass".

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## Understanding Your Student's Journey with Crohn's or Colitis

by Crohn's and Colitis Canada

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). These diseases are not contagious, however their symptoms can be very debilitating and can affect an individual's quality of life. They are life-long conditions that affect the digestive tract or gastrointestinal (GI) tract causing ulceration and resulting in severe pain, urgent bathroom visits and often requiring medication or surgery to treat. Since Crohn's and colitis inflame the lining of the GI tract, digesting food, absorbing nutrients and eliminating waste can be challenging. In Canada, there are nearly 250,000 people with Crohn's or colitis, or one in every 150 Canadians. People with Crohn's or colitis tend to be diagnosed in their late teens or early 20s; however, the number of children living with IBD in Canada has almost doubled since 1995. An estimated 6,000 Canadian children have Crohn's or colitis.

Chances are one of your students may be affected by Crohn's or colitis. Students living with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis may find themselves needing extra support and accommodations in school in order to be successful in their academics AND to ensure that their health is maintained.

Students with Crohn's or colitis go through times when their disease is active and causing symptoms (also known as a 'flare-up') and times when it is not active and few or no symptoms are present (also called 'remission'). Many medications are aimed at bringing periods of flare-ups into a state of remission and keeping it that way for as long as possible.

Common symptoms include: abdominal pain (sometimes severe); cramping; gas and bloating; fatigue; diarrhea (possibly bloody), often frequent and urgent; loss of appetite; weight loss; nausea or vomiting; and joint pain.

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are unique to each individual and coping methods can range from person-to-person. Both diseases are unpredictable and symptoms can vary.

Students with Crohn's or colitis may feel embarrassed, different from their peers, fatigued, stressed and or anxious/depressed. These issues may lead a student to withdraw from group or social activities, act out in anger, and/or neglect their diet and medications.

The best way for a teacher to respond to the needs of their students with Crohn's or colitis is to treat them as individuals, helping them identify their needs while

in school, and supporting access to the accommodations they may require. The student, his/her family, teachers and school administrators share a common goal of wanting the student to be successful in their academic careers.

### MEAL TIME AT SCHOOL

Food choices can be a tricky thing for parents and teachers when a student has Crohn's or colitis. Again, because the diseases are so individual, many students generally follow a custom meal plan of what works for them. This meal plan has been developed over time, often using a trial and error process and students are generally very familiar with what works for them. Discuss with the student and his/her parents what foods should be avoided (also known as 'personal trigger foods'). These foods vary and may change if the student is on certain medications. Ask the parents to let the school and teacher know of any changes in medication or diet as early as possible.

It is common for schools to host pizza lunches, birthday and holiday celebrations. With some advance warning, it is possible for the parents and teachers to make accommodations at school events that will have food present. Here are some tips:

Try to provide the parent with one week notice about an event;

Encourage parents to recommend where to purchase, for example, dairy-free pizza if the student is restricted from dairy;

If the student has a number of dietary restrictions, reassure the parents and the student that they won't be excluded from the event, and welcome a 'safer' pizza alternative from home; and

Help the student feel accepted and included by avoiding too much focus on the food – instead, keep the celebrations front and centre.

### WASHROOM BREAKS

Diarrhea and frequent/urgent washroom visits are a common element of living with Crohn's and colitis. Some people may experience 20 or more trips to the washroom during the course of a day when experiencing a flare-up. Students will experience a high degree of

anxiety and fear when this occurs but you can help your student(s) feel at ease in moments of pain and discomfort. Support your student(s) by allowing him or her to use the washroom as needed, even providing a personalized 'open hall pass' where such are required. Consider arranging to have the student sit near the door of the classroom so that they can slip out discreetly rather than disrupting the class.

Simple washroom accommodations, like the hall pass, help the student feel more comfortable and less anxious about having an accident – it can help keep his or her focus on your lesson plan. It may also be helpful to arrange, where possible, for the student to have use of a bathroom other than the student washrooms. Having frequent diarrhea in a public area with lots of other children around can be excruciatingly embarrassing.

### CHANGE OF CLOTHES

Due to the urgent nature of washroom visits for a student with Crohn's or colitis, sometimes accidents happen. Teachers and parents are encouraged to have a change of clothes left at the school. Emergency contact numbers should also be accessible for teachers to use to contact family in case of an accident or emergency.

### ABSENCES FROM SCHOOL

Crohn's and colitis are unpredictable, and students may miss classes for a short or extended period of time depending on the severity of their symptoms. Absences from class may be due to routine doctor's appointments or to periods of hospitalization. Please be supportive and flexible with assignment deadlines. Try to communicate regularly with the student's family to arrange homework drop-offs/pick-ups (this is, if there is a possibility that the student can study at home). Having a teacher stay in touch while the student is out of school can be an important way to limit isolation and encourage the student to stay engaged.

### EXAMS AND TEST

Exams and tests are stressful for most students. Although stress is not a cause of Crohn's or colitis, it may aggravate or increase symptoms. During testing, teachers should allow the student washroom breaks

as needed, as they did in the classroom, and provide extra time to make up for time away from the test. Again, as with the classroom seating plan, allowing the student to sit near the exit will limit disruption to others and minimize embarrassment. Specialist doctor's visits, such as to a pediatric gastroenterologist or to a physician in another city or town, may be very difficult to re-schedule. If an appointment falls on a test date, work with the student and parents to find a way to accommodate the appointment. If hospitalization occurs over a test or exam period, make arrangements with the parents to connect and discuss re-scheduling once the student has recovered.

Informed teachers can make school easier for students with IBD. That's why Crohn's and Colitis Canada created *A TEACHER'S GUIDE: Understanding Your Student's Journey With Crohn's or Colitis*. It's a great resource for you to inform yourself about the disease and accommodating students.

**Crohn's and Colitis Canada is the only national, volunteer-based charity focused on finding the cures for Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and improving the lives of children and adults affected by these diseases. We are one of the top two health charity funders of Crohn's and colitis research in the world, investing over \$100 million in research since 1974, leading to important breakthroughs in genetics, gut microbes, inflammation and cell repair as well as laying the groundwork for new and better treatments. We are transforming the lives of people affected by Crohn's and colitis (the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease) through research, patient programs, advocacy, and awareness. To find out more, visit [crohnsandcolitis.ca](http://crohnsandcolitis.ca).**

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