

Helping Teachers Cope with Stress

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There can be no doubt that teacher stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction are critical issues in education today. If we are to reduce stress, we must provide teachers with greater support and rewards. Improvement is needed in working conditions, professional status, public support, and compensation. In the meantime, school systems should provide teachers with environments and programs of support to help them cope with the high levels of stress they continue to experience.

I have organized several stress management programs for teachers and student teachers. In general, these programs deal with stress theory, identification of stressors and strategies for coping with them, development of support systems, and professional growth opportunities.

Stress Theory. Stress is part of all of our lives, but it is not necessarily bad for us. Too little stress results in boredom and stagnation. Too much stress eventually affects our mental and physical health and lowers the satisfaction we

get from our work (Selye, 1974; Pelletier, 1977). It can also impair our ability to think clearly, solve problems, and deal effectively with the demands of life (Sparks, 1979).

The body reacts to stress as a whole. We cannot separate mental from physical stress or personal from professional stress (Pelletier, 1977). The goal in stress management is for each of us to find our optimal stress level.

Identification of Stressors. It is essential that the causes of personal and professional stress be identified so that problems can be isolated and resolved. Among the instruments that help identify personal stressors are:

—The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes and Rahe, 1967)

—The Wellness Inventory (Travis, 1977).

The following instruments can be used to identify sources of professional stress:

—NYSUT Survey on Teacher Stress (New York State United Teachers, 1979)

—Dismal Dozen Checklist (Kossack, 1980)

—Caretaker Survey (Roy, 1979)

—School Events Survey (Young, 1980)

—Q-Sort Stress Survey (Manera and Wright, 1980)

—Stress Inventory (Sparks, 1979).

Strategies for Coping with Stress. After personal and professional stressors are identified, teachers need to develop strategies for coping with them. As individuals, we will have different stressors as well as different coping solutions.

While we may not be able to control stress, we must realize that we are responsible for our reactions to stressors. No one else can control our reactions.

It is important at this point to explore the myth of the "super teacher." Teachers often think it is possible to do all that is asked of them—and to do it perfectly. This is an impossible standard to live up to. Given the number of roles teachers are called on to play (Edgerton, 1977) and the number of interactions they enter into each day, there is no way they can always be successful. Programs of stress management should help teachers set realistic standards for themselves. Teachers must get rid of the myth of the "super teacher" and begin to focus on and feel satisfied with the successes they do have. Instead of thinking about what

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Stress management can help teachers identify their problems, find ways to deal with them, provide support for each other, and increase their self-esteem.

went wrong on a given day, they should learn to think about what went right.

We must also legitimize "taking." Many teachers have "caretaker personalities" (Roy, 1979)—they care for and give to others before thinking of their own needs. They must learn that they cannot continue to give without replenishing. This means learning to "take" for oneself, even though to most teachers this idea seems unnatural and selfish.

"Taking" may be in the form of physical exercise, time outs, special events or plans to look forward to, mental health days, nutritional diets, B and C vitamins, long baths or showers, vacations, sabbaticals or leaves, or simply saying a professional "no" to extra duties or committees.

Beyond this, teachers will benefit from training in the use of relaxation techniques. Progressive relaxation, autogenic training, and stress reduction exercises can help relieve physical and emotional tensions (Brown, 1977; Budzynski, 1978) and should be included in stress management programs.

Teachers also need to take time off. They deserve lives outside the classroom, and students deserve teachers who have had such time. Teachers may need to structure their classrooms so

there is less work to take home. More student self-direction, responsibility, and involvement in the classroom benefits both teacher and students. Time management techniques enable teachers to use time more effectively so they gain more time off. In general, such techniques include planning and prioritizing in order to get more done in less time (Lakein, 1973). The sense of organization that results is itself a stress reducer.

Development of Support Systems. Teachers tend to work in isolation, yet they undergo similar stresses. Dunham, in a study of British teachers, concluded that teachers with problems see themselves as different from others and think they alone are having problems. As a result they internalize their difficulties rather than seeking aid or solutions (Newell, 1980).

We need to develop environments where teachers can admit failures, share successes, and support one another. Support groups provide such environments. They meet at regularly scheduled times and allow each member to share while the rest of the group provides support. Between meetings, individual members can give additional support through phone calls, notes, or visits. Guidelines for support groups usually provide for members to be (1) from sim-

ilar circumstances, (2) noncompetitive, (3) willing to give constructive criticism, (4) unwilling to listen to negatives or griping, and (5) committed to staying in the same group over time.

The Challenge Process, a technique developed by Sparks (1979), applies the techniques of group problem solving and focuses on the positive—working on challenges rather than problems. The group works through three stages with its members: stating a challenge, brainstorming suggestions, and making a contract.

Another type of support system is the Child Study Group. Once a week, before school, members meet to discuss a student for which a group member needs advice. Members offer solutions, and the teacher with the problem decides which of these will be implemented in the coming week. These meetings focus on the resolution of problems with students, but an additional outcome is teachers supporting teachers.

Professional Growth Opportunities. It is critical that professional growth opportunities be developed and chosen with teacher input. Imposed inservice does not reduce stress; it may, in fact, increase tensions.

Since stress is highly related to self-

esteem (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978), appropriately designed professional experiences can raise teacher self-esteem through growth in areas of interest or self-identified need. They also provide welcome changes of pace and environment. Designs for professional growth should include respect for teacher competence and willingness to change, individual identification and pursuit of an area for growth, administrative and peer support, and a practical, on-the-job emphasis (Edelfelt, 1974; Howey, 1976; and Lawrence, 1974).

Teachers can also find renewal, growth, and support through sabbaticals, leaves of absence, visitations to other classrooms and schools, job rotation, exchange teaching, and conference attendance. School systems should recognize that such activities are necessary for staff development and renewal. ■

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Portland Teachers Defy Some Common Misconceptions of Educators

With so much negative publicity about teacher burnout, it seems appropriate to give some attention to the other side of the question: What about those who stay in teaching? What kind of people are they and how do they feel about their profession?

These kinds of questions were explored in a major study in the Portland metropolitan area.¹ Results of the study appear to contradict much of the current thinking about teacher attitudes and motivation. Teachers are *not* afflicted with mass depression nor is cynicism threatening their psyches. Here's what the Portland area study showed.

- *Overall job satisfaction among teachers appears to be extremely high.* Ninety-eight percent reported receiving an "average amount" to a "great deal" of satisfaction from their work, with nearly 75 percent saying they would choose again to go into teaching if such a decision had to be made. Only 1.6 percent said they are "extremely dissatisfied" with their profession.

- *Teachers' attitudes about themselves and their colleagues are generally very positive.* Teachers hold extraordinarily high professional self-concepts. Ninety-eight percent reported feeling "successful" to "extremely successful" in their work. Similarly, 98 percent reported others would also think them "very successful."

- *Burnout may be a vastly overstated problem.* If the statistics here are generalizable to the entire population of teachers, it is reasonable to conclude that a relatively small number of very squeaky wheels are getting excessive amounts of attention at

the expense of the great majority of teachers. Inordinate concentration on burnout may in itself contribute to the syndrome by persuading otherwise contented teachers that they should be dissatisfied with their lot in life. The study did not seem to whitewash difficult problems when and where they exist. But it does suggest that substantial numbers of teachers are basically pleased with themselves, their work, and have an almost tenacious commitment to the profession.

The results of this study will be questioned by many readers who, like me, assumed teachers would reflect the general public's cynical and negative attitudes toward education. Some might also suggest that the sample was too narrow and not a cross section of "real" American education. Still, the schools in this area have experienced their share of declining enrollment, "riffing," school closures, budget failures, strikes, and other ailments that have afflicted the schools in such places as Newark and Detroit. But if intensely dismal perspectives are held by teachers in those areas, similar views should have shown up in this study!

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