

Stress Tips for Busy Teachers

adapted from Sue and Barbara Gruber Course

The bell rings and your students head out the door at the end of the school day! You need to leave school in forty-five minutes to get to a dental appointment. That should be just enough time to change a bulletin board to go with the theme you plan to begin tomorrow. Just as you tear down the last piece of the bulletin board, a parent drops by for an impromptu conference. Before you know it, twenty minutes have ticked by and the bulletin board is still bare. You dash to the office to get paper for the bulletin board and you are intercepted by the principal who asks how your opinion about some new curriculum ideas. By the time you get back to your room, you are left with 14 minutes to complete the bulletin board. You decide it's better to leave it blank than to put up just a portion of it. You tidy up your desk and head out the door frustrated that unexpected interruptions stopped you from completing a simple task! Now what?

1. You can go to school extra early and finish it prior to the before-school faculty meeting.
2. You can put up the bulletin board heading before school tomorrow morning and add to it throughout the day, finishing it up after school.
3. You can postpone the job until after school tomorrow.

All three of these options are possibilities---why not choose the one that is least stressful?

In a perfect world, there would be no interruptions and tasks would always be completed in the allotted times. Reality is that our world is far from perfect. Every teacher knows that the job of being a teacher is fraught with unexpected happenings and constant interruptions. That's why it's especially important for us to learn to adapt, manage and cope with stress---it is essential to our health, happiness and sense of well-being. We can't eliminate stress---we can learn techniques to effectively manage stress. Stress is an inherent part of life for everyone!

What is stress?

Stress does not happen to us---it is something we talk ourselves into. Our stress levels depend on our reactions to events in our lives. We can choose to let people and situations get us angry and upset or we can choose to let it go. We can react in such a way that we do not feel upset by the inevitable stressors that are part of daily life. For example:

At the airport, when a flight is cancelled some passengers rant and rave.

Others react by figuring out other travel options.

In a traffic jam, some drivers furiously blow horns and yell.

Others accept the fact that they are stuck in traffic, listen to the radio, sit back and relax and hope traffic starts moving soon.

Before school starts, teachers forewarn you that you will have students with behavior problems and difficult parents.

Some teachers get upset and anticipate having a bad year.

Others choose to assess students and parents for themselves and then do the best job they can.

At a faculty meeting, the principal announces a new requirement of teachers.

Some teachers are upset and agonize over how much more work they will have to do.

Other teachers ask themselves what they are already doing that may meet the new requirements. If extra work is required they make time for it by eliminating something that is less important.

Parents suggest how you should be managing your classroom.

Some teachers feel stressed and defensive. They rationalize and make lengthy explanations hoping to gain approval from parents.

Others listen to the parents' comments while continuing to feel confident about their teaching styles. They thank parents for sharing their ideas and opinions.

Changing the Ways We Think

Life is difficult for perfectionists in our less-than-perfect world. Try your best to let go of perfectionism and strive to be more flexible. If that bulletin board isn't "picture perfect," no one will know except you. Your students will like it and that's what counts. Relax your standards a bit. For example, involve students in some of the set-up tasks. Their team spirit and sense of ownership should increase. Focus less on pleasing others and focus more on pleasing yourself. Negativity is contagious! Stay clear of the grouchy complainers and worriers who focus on one negative thing after another. Did you know 75% of conversations on a daily basis are negative? There is already enough "catastrophizing and awfulizing" in this world. Begin to think positive first! Surround yourself with upbeat people who are flexible and fun to be around. Energized, enthusiastic teachers know how to handle stress and their classrooms are happy places for students to learn.



Changing the Ways We Work

Organizing your desk and your workspace will make work days less stressful. When you work smart and are organized, there are fewer frustrations at school. Prioritize. Which tasks are really necessary to complete and which ones can wait?

Changing the Ways We Communicate

Learning to communicate our feelings honestly is a sure way to avoid bottled up feelings of anger and frustration. Learn assertive communication skills so you can express your feelings and needs in polite, yet powerful ways.

Being able to say "no" and mean it is one way to reduce stress. At most schools, the same teachers always take on extra responsibilities and assignments. Others seem to fade into the woodwork and avoid participation in extra duties. Give yourself a year off from participating on committees. When asked to take on an extra responsibility say, "No thank you, I've been the chairperson for two years. Someone else needs to take a turn this year." No matter how you are flattered, coaxed and begged to do it for one more year, stick to your refusal and let someone else do his/her fair share.

Don't let people and situations put you under pressure. When a parent asks an unexpected question at a conference, tell them:

- ★You need time to think about it and you will get back to them.
- ★You need to research the answer and will get back to them.

Jot yourself a reminder note so you are sure to follow up on issues and questions.

Establish some emotional distance from your work. Teaching is a profession with work that never ends---there is always more you can do. It can easily take over your life, if you let that happen. Give yourself permission to work reasonable hours and have some time for your friends, family and yourself. You schedule everything else in your life but do you regularly schedule "fun"? When you treat yourself well, you will have more energy and enthusiasm for your job and for life in general.

Ten Simple Ways Everyone Can Reduce Stress

1. Get up 15 minutes earlier so mornings are less hectic.
2. Avoid over-scheduling yourself so you have a realistic, calm day instead of a frantic day with an impossible schedule.
3. Learn to say "No" to projects, committees and social activities you don't have time, energy or interest in doing.
4. Do a project you are dreading first thing in the morning. Get it behind you so you can enjoy the day!
5. Learn to delegate responsibilities to others.
6. Surround yourself with positive, upbeat friends and colleagues. People who constantly worry and complain manipulate others into negativity.
7. Make sure to get a good night's sleep!
8. Relax and enjoy a change of pace on weekends. Do some things you truly enjoy. Make time for fun, family and friends.
9. Forget about multi-tasking and focus on one thing at a time. Complete one task before moving on to the next one.
10. Focus on today instead of worrying about tomorrow. Do not create issues (make up stories) in your mind that really do not exist. Issues are not real and we have a habit of allowing our minds to over-exaggerate and invent the worst possible outcomes with our issues.

When will the stress be out of your life?

Probably never...how you choose to handle stress is what makes the difference. Stress is part of life---there is no way to eliminate it. Choose to cope with stress in ways that are positive. Make a conscious effort to smile and laugh more often. How often have you observed little children and said "What a life they have---stress free, not a care in the world, oh to be young again?" Did you realize that as a child you laughed approximately 400 times a day? By the time you reach adulthood, that number is reduced to a mere 15 a day. Learn to laugh at yourself and at seemingly stressful situations. Scientific studies show that you begin to look like you think and that optimists live longer lives than pessimists. Add a little more humor in your life---create opportunities to laugh. You'll be happy you did!

