

How can a teacher's stress be reduced?

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This month, I dipped into some of the research on reducing the stress levels of teachers. Surprised? Yes, I thought you would be!

After all, with exams round the corner, one would expect the focus to be on the stress levels of students, and perhaps the parents and siblings of the exam-taking students! *But what about the teacher?* Does anyone even notice the constant furrow on her brow, the slouch in his back, the shortness of her breath, those rare moments of full-throated laughter? Hemmed in by huge expectations from parents, students, principals and society, is it at all surprising that a teacher can quite often be under a great deal of stress?

You may well wonder about the relevance of the research paper that I am going to share with you since it is from Canada and pertains to courses on stress management in their teacher preparation programs. But you would be surprised by the number of **stress-inducing factors** listed in this paper that teachers almost anywhere share with them. Here they are:

1. Multiple demands, along with inadequate resources.
2. Administrative tasks.
3. Work-related changes associated with additional (or different) responsibilities.
4. High class size.

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5. New programs or curricula with little or no training to deliver them.
6. Insufficient preparation time.
7. Pressure to be involved in school activities outside of regular teacher duties.
8. Long work hours.
9. Role ambiguity.
10. Conflicting expectations from parents, school management and students.
11. Student (mis)behaviour.
12. Lack of parental support.

I am quite sure that you found yourself nodding in agreement to most (if not all) of the 12 points listed above.

Now that I have captured your attention, let me tell you about this research study and its findings. To begin with, let's acquaint ourselves with a few terms.

A **stressor** is defined as a trigger that can activate stressful responses: these could be environmental (like 1-8 and 11 in the list above) or psychological (like no: 9 and 10). **Stress reactivity** is the term given to the activation of a stress response. While

Individual Stress Management Coursework in Canadian Teacher Preparation Programs

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there are various ways in which this activation can occur, the most common one is the 'fight or flight' response. In this, the nervous system gets activated and prepares the body for a 'fight or flight' response. For a long time, this was considered an involuntary system until it was discovered that strategies could be developed to consciously control it. **Strain** is defined as the outcome of stress reactivity, which would be either in the form of an illness or a behavioural change. Factors that can serve to control or reduce stressful reactivity and strain are called **mediating variables** and examples include self-talk, appraisal, social support, personality and temperament. These are important elements of an individualized stress management program.

While a teacher's stress-causing factors have already been listed, it is pertinent to ask *how strain manifests in a teacher*. Teachers who become overwhelmed by stress can feel unsupported, turn hopeless, indulge in frequent absenteeism, fall sick (physically or psychologically), burnout and ultimately leave the profession. Needless to say, stress renders a teacher less effective in the classroom. You may well ask why a teacher doesn't develop ways of confronting his stress? Well, this is a 'catch 22' question. A teacher in this predicament experiences a lack of energy – and designing coping strategies demands energy! This sets in motion a spiral by damaging teacher-student relationships because of the stressed-out behaviour of the teacher. As emotional barriers build up in the classroom, there is a very real possibility of this then spilling over into the teacher's personal life. What this translates to is multiple strains on the teacher – from several directions.

This is where the paper takes an interesting position: it focuses on **individual stress management**, which is why I felt like sharing it with readers here!

The steps that the researcher outlines seem to be so patently obvious:

- Learn about stress (begin by reading this paper!).
- Understand how to recognize stress.



Now bring it into the classroom!

1. Start maintaining a very brief journal of your *thoughts and feelings* – not events. The entries could be just a set of phrases like “feeling energetic today”, “totally exhausted this morning”, “angry and resentful towards – today”, “fed up with staff meetings”, “excited by the thought of the upcoming vacation”, etc.
2. If you are a lazy writer, audio record your feelings and thoughts on your phone at the end of the day. That’s easy, isn’t it?
3. Just plod on and keep a record at first. Resist the temptation to quickly conclude something about yourself or others. Go over your entries **after a month** and see the trend.
 - a. What do you think caused you most stress?
 - b. How did this stress manifest in you as strain? Was it behavioural or physiological?
 - c. How often have you felt hopeless? Drained? Like quitting?
 - d. How often have you felt enthusiastic? Raring to go? Joyful?
 - e. What are your vulnerable points? Who/ what tends to push your buttons most easily? Why is this so?
 - f. What do you see as a pattern?
4. Now list your stressors.
5. Notice your stress reactivity. Who are your most frequent targets?
6. Connect your stress reactivity to the stressors if possible.
7. Which of the stressors do you see as being in your control?
8. Select one or more of the suggested remedies in the table given in this article and see what works for you, e.g. –
 - a. Would diaphragmatic breathing help?
 - b. Would unwinding through a trip or chatting with a colleague work?
 - c. Who can you lean on more for support?
 - d. Can you bring in more humour into each day?
 - e. Are you spending any time at all in sheer relaxation? Fun?
9. Set yourself a goal and begin working towards it.

Send in your findings to
thinkingteacher22@gmail.com.

- Develop strategies to prevent stress.
- Adopt interventions to address existing stress.

When an effort is first made to *learn about stress and understand how to recognize it*, there is greater likelihood of the stressed teacher then finding and investing the energy to address it. The paper goes on to describe the prevalence and quality of stress management courses in Canadian teacher preparation programs. Since my focus here is more on *what one can do as an individual* to reduce stress, I am not describing the quantitative findings of the number of stress management courses in such programs. I am instead focusing on the content of such courses.

Such a course has as its overarching objective the helping of students to develop self-management plans for stress management and acquire the skills for successful implementation of their plans. At the outset, the course starts with an emphasis on creating a safe environment for the students and building teacher-student rapport. The critical significance of making a student *feel safe in such an environment* is stressed, underlining that it is even more important in such a course than it is in mainstream academic courses. Some strategies include:

- Ice breaker activities.
- Discussions early in the course on what each one would like to take away from it.
- Giving students a *choice* to take risks and step outside their comfort zones, thus always being sensitive to the fact that the course should not add stress!
- Spending 10 minutes in open discussions, which nevertheless allows shy students to use different means (see next point).
- Using anonymous submissions and private sharing to enable students who are shy or scared to speak in front of the entire class to come out with what bothers them.
- Sharing foundational knowledge in the first few classes about what stress is, how it can be caused, how it manifests, how it can be managed, etc.
- Understanding mediating variables like personality and temperament, so that definitional issues are tackled.
- Exploring student perceptions of stress and stress management.
- Helping students identify stress causing factors through journal writing, questionnaires, fill-in-the-blanks, discussion, etc.
- Guiding students to observe non-verbal cues of stress (in others as well as themselves) and noting cues in submitted work, meetings, informal encounters and impromptu conversations.
- Using role play as one of the ways of exploring stress and how it can manifest.



The next step is **goal setting**: students are encouraged to reflect on where they perceive themselves now and where they wish to be – how motivated are they to effect the desired change? This is followed by going deeply into **prevention and intervention methods**, which I am tabulating under four broad categories below:

Cognitive and Perceptual	Affective and Emotional	Physiological	Behavioural
Primary appraisal of a potential stressor	Visualization	Exercise and nutrition	Time management
Irrational beliefs, self-defeating statements, absolute statements	Emotional regulation	Diaphragmatic breathing	Teacher time out
Locating the evidence, experimentation	Emotional intelligence	Relaxation training	Boundary setting
Problem-solving and mindfulness	Humour	Hypnosis/Self induction	Conflict resolution

There is a large proportion of the course that is devoted to skill development. Speakers who can inspire others by talking of their own ways of handling stress are invited to class, and students are taken out of class on trips to unwind and enhance student-student engagement. Assessment is done by reviewing ongoing journals that are maintained by students throughout the course, as well as through group presentations in a safe environment. Ample time is ensured towards the end of the course for debrief, goal setting and evaluation of whatever was done till date.

Seeing how much thought and detailed work has gone into the designing of such courses for pre-service teachers, what are your thoughts on working to reduce stress for in-service teachers? Bring it into the classroom by emailing us with your responses to the questions in the box below!

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