

## **I Can't Stress it Enough!**

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As teachers, there is one thing that always seems to elude us – How to get everything done without stressing about it! Teachers are professional people, usually not needing a lot of external motivation. We are in our classrooms because we care about each one of our students. What happens in our children's lives affects us personally. When a child feels pain, teachers share that pain. It is in our nature as teachers to care – and stress.



Stress, according to Wikipedia, is defined as the sum of physical and mental responses to an unacceptable disparity between real or imagined personal experience and personal expectations. In fact, stress can be divided into good stress and bad stress. This can also be called stress or distress. Good stress enhances our functionality. Bad stress has the opposite effect. Stress is essentially the wear and tear that our bodies experience as we adjust to our environment, affecting both our physical and mental state; hence, it is a psycho-physiological response. Stress can be triggered by events (stressors) in our lives such as good events like graduation, or winning the lottery or by a negative event such as exams or the death of a student in our school.

The mental part of our stress triggers a whole bunch of neuro-chemical responses. Catecholamine and glucocorticoid hormones are released in the body. The exhibition of stress can be anxiety, antagonism, exhaustion, frustration, distress, despair, overwork, pre-menstrual tension, over-focusing, confusion, mourning, and fear. If stress persists, even at low levels, it can lead to bad or counterproductive stress. At this point we have some options - either to escape or to withdraw from the stimulus or to react to the stimulus. Some call this the 'fight or flight' theory. If we ignore stress the consequences can be significant - wearing out the body's reserves, leaving a person feeling depleted or overwhelmed, ending in major health loss and possibly even death.

Not all stress is bad because stress does keep us together, believe-it-or-not. Even from a physiological perspective, muscles under tension keep our skeletal structure in place but under too much stress injury can occur. Stress, at school, can help to keep us motivated yet if left uncontrolled can actually lead to a decrease in performance. Stressed-out teachers have a higher illness rate and cost their employers in money and time. Illness can be anything from suffering back pain, from being too tense, all the way to mental breakdown. Generally, we refer to stress in the negative sense. Everyone experiences and reacts to stress differently. Some get angry and lose control of their emotions. Others internalize stress. Some demonstrate their response or display symptoms by having physical, mental or a combination of stress overloads.

So how do we balance these demands with the other demands on our lives such as home and church duties? Which stressors are you overreacting to or overanxious about? Which stresses can we manage and which do we have to dismiss or walk away from? The

answer is that all of our stresses have to be dealt with. How come we are stressing when some other teachers appear to have it under control? The answer lies in determining the optimal stress levels for each of us, since we are all unique. Staying at or just below our optimal level keeps us productive and motivated but will not overwhelm us. Stress management does not necessarily mean stress reduction. Rather, stress management is finding the right balance of stress and distress.

From experience in a school setting here are ten ways to handle your stress levels:

1. The school year goes through a big cycle with high stress points and low stress points. These cannot be avoided but if you are mentally prepared for the rough patches, in other words mentally 'psyched' for them, you can use your banked emotional reserves at these times. For me, the critical times are just before school starts in the fall, the three weeks before Christmas, the weeks leading up to spring break and then graduation preparations. Intentionally plan out your whole school year. Yearly plans, unit plans and daily plans help you handle your stress.
2. Be aware of what stresses you. Each month I have one high-stress point - school board meetings. I move as much other stuff out of the way and don't schedule any critical meetings during that week because I can't cope with the emotional drain. The meetings are on a Monday evening, but by the time all the sub-committees are done, so am I!
3. Learn to recognize what you can and cannot change. Some members of the school community work the same issues over and over. Don't overreact to these members. You can't please everyone so don't let them get in your head. Relax. Temper your emotions. Focus on the positive aspects of your job. Try not to get sidetracked.
4. Stress seems to be more manageable when you share it with supportive friends. Establish relationships with some friends with whom you can share both your good and not-so-good times. Talk to them when you are stressed.
5. Talk to your immediate supervisor, be it the vice principal, principal or your superintendent. They have experience in listening to fellow teachers and may be able to share some of their own stress relief systems with you. They may be able to adjust the class or work load to assist you during stressful times.
6. If you are overstressed and feel that you do not have the stress relief skills necessary to overcome your stress, then you need to seek professional medical advice. The medical practitioners have the training and may have the answers for you.
7. Although we work in a religious organization - and it should be one of the most perfect work environments - it is actually more stressful for teachers, since we not only work with the students in our classroom but we have to interact with parents and students while at church and in social circles. You are continually being scrutinized and measured as an employee. Find time to do activities and spend time in interests that are just for yourself - study at a community college, play a sport, or join a club in the community.

8. Exercise on a regular basis. Take a walk or work in the garden when you get home in the evening. Do breathing exercises during the day. Eat healthful meals and maintain a regular daily routine, which should include adequate sleep time.
9. When you are having a 'bad day' and the students just seem to have lost their ears or can't sit still, it may be a reaction to how you are handling your day. How you behave affects how students behave. Your stress translates into more stress on their part. This is called 'Activation' by the Crisis Prevention Institute. You pull the trigger on their behavior. Change your plans for the day, take the kids to the gym or go out to the playground and pick up garbage lying around. You'll be surprised at how the rest of the day will go.
10. Most of all, call on your spiritual power. Some times we just run out of earthly options. Talk to the Creator of the universe. He created you and He knows your limits. He will give you the strength to get you through thick and thin. He will turn out to be your best friend.

We need to remember that if we do not overcome stress it will overcome us.