

Ways to Avoid Classroom Burnout and Stay Healthy

Coping with Stress in the Classroom

Within the first few weeks of school there will be many new demands made of you: new texts, new techniques, new schedules, new students and a new way of life. It's an exciting as well as a stressful time for all of us.

In the midst of all this excitement, you may notice some physical and emotional reactions to the new demands. Understanding what is happening will help you cope with these responses.

The only people without stress are in the cemetery! It isn't stress that causes problems, but rather the inappropriate choices we make in coping with the demands on us.

People who don't deal positively with stressful situations become ill. This occurs because the body's immune system is worn down in the fight against the stressors. Migraines, ulcers, backaches, constipation and heart attacks are only a few of the physical consequences of inappropriate coping techniques.

Experienced teachers have found some useful techniques and some "preventive medicine" to protect against debilitating stress symptoms:

Exercise! After a day of teaching, you owe it to your body to shake off the chalk dust. It will revive you. Exercise also

helps rid the body of chemicals that are discharged as a result of stress. The best cardiovascular activities include walking, swimming, bicycling and jogging. (Always clear your exercise plan with your physician.)

Leave your teaching at school. If you must lug home schoolwork, get it done early in the evening. Better yet, do it at school and leave it there.

Be good to yourself. What could do more for your self-esteem than to take yourself out to dinner or buy yourself a treat?

Always have something to look forward to. This will perk up your spirits.

Don't schedule all of your leisure hours. You live by a schedule all day long. Leave yourself some "open space."

Get plenty of sleep. Go to bed early if you are tired. Don't lie awake worrying about how you should have handled Johnny in class.

Observe good eating habits. Watch your vitamin and mineral supplements. You need to eat wholesome foods so that your body takes in a sufficient amount of calcium, potassium, iron, vitamin B, vitamin C and protein. When in stress, the system calls on these nutrients for energy. If they are not available, the physiological system breaks down and you get tired or sick.

Pursue a project or hobby that involves your concentration so much that you forget about school. You'll find this much more relaxing than doing nothing but thinking about school.

Find a friend who can be a "trusted" listener. Talking a problem out won't make it go away, but it can relieve tension. Do your talking in a private place. Don't vent your frustrations in a public place where you can be overheard and misunderstood.



Preventing Classroom Stress

- ▶ Involve students and parents in the development of classroom procedures and rules.
- ▶ Develop management guidelines that are appropriate to the age and cultural context of the students.
- ▶ Emphasize the development of self-discipline in the classroom management plan.
- ▶ Communicate desired behaviors, expectations, and rules to students on a regular basis.
- ▶ Be flexible in implementing the management plan; remember that situations change, students develop new interests, and each person is unique.
- ▶ Utilize cooperative learning strategies that promote the involvement of all students.
- ▶ Review the management plan periodically to assure that needed refinements are made.
- ▶ Know the behavior of the students as much as possible and integrate this knowledge into classroom management planning.
- ▶ Anticipate potential problems and design scenarios for responding to them.
- ▶ Evaluate the plan at least once a year, using the results to refine and improve it.

Swick, Kevin S., *Student Stress: A Classroom Management System*, Washington, D.C., National Education Association, 1987.

KNEA Tips: Avoiding Classroom Burnout & Coping with Stress in the Classroom

- **Don't procrastinate about things you have to do.** Having something "hanging over you" can cause more tension than the project is worth.
- **Don't feel you have to do everything.** You can't and you won't. So why worry about it?
- **Keep a "things to do" list.** Review it daily and do at least one or two things. When you cross something off the list, you will have a sense of accomplishment.
- **Rid yourself of worry.** A study has shown that 40 percent of the items people worry about never happen; 35 percent can be changed; 15 percent turn out better than expected; 8 percent involve needless concern; and only 2 percent really deserve attention.
- **Learn to plan.** Disorganization breeds stress. Having too many projects going at the same time leads to confusion, forgetfulness, and a terrible sense of incompleteness hanging over one's head. Plan ahead. Develop your own personal style of getting things done in a calm, orderly way. Whenever possible, take on projects one at a time and work on them until completed.
- **Learn to play.** You need to regularly escape from the pressures of life and have fun. Find pastimes or hobbies that are absorbing and enjoyable regardless of your level of ability.
- **Recognize and accept limits.** Most of us set unreasonable and perfectionist goals for ourselves. But we can never be perfect (or even come close), so we often have a sense of failure or inadequacy no matter how well we perform. Reevaluate your goals with ruthless realism. Are they achievable? Or do they reflect an effort to reach perfection, certainty or ultimate security in a very imperfect world? Is that what life is really all about?
- **Learn to tolerate and forgive.** Intolerance and judging of others leads to frustration and anger. Try to really understand the other person's concerns and fears. Try to see the pressures on them. This will make you feel more accepting of them even if you do not agree with their behavior options.
- **Be a positive person.** Avoid criticizing others. Learn to praise the things you like in others. Focus on the good qualities of those around you. Excessive criticism of others almost always reflects dissatisfaction with oneself.
- **Avoid unnecessary competition.** Many competitive situations cannot be avoided. But too much concern with winning in too many areas of life creates tension and hostility. It is generally desirable to minimize competitiveness and concern with winning.
- **Get regular physical exercise.** Check with your physician before beginning any exercise program. You will be more likely to stay with the program if you choose one that you really enjoy rather than one that seems like drudgery. It is difficult to overstate the importance of regular, vigorous exercise for good physical and mental health.
- **Talk out your troubles.** Find a friend, member of the clergy, counselor or therapist you can be open with. Expressing your "bottled up" tension and concerns to an understanding and sympathetic ear can be incredibly helpful.