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Introduction

To our readers,

A woman showed up at traffic court after receiving a ticket for speeding. "Your Honour," the woman said, "can we hurry this along? I am a school teacher and I have a classroom full of students waiting."

The judge leaned back in his seat. "A school teacher, eh?" he repeated, smiling broadly. "Well, I have been waiting for this day for a long time. You go sit down at that table in the corner and write 'I will not speed' five hundred times!"

It can be the best of jobs; it can be the worst of jobs.

You are an educator. I do not have to describe for you the thrilling anticipation of the first day of school, the feeling you get when you hold every student's attention while delivering a dynamic lesson, or the satisfaction of watching that struggling student when she or he finally achieves success. Who needs the ecstasy of reaching a mountain peak – when you can teach?

You are an educator. So, I don't need to present an argument for the idea that teachers (and administrators) are under tremendous stress. You know that well. You experience and observe it daily.

My colleague and co-writer, Dr Brenda Cole, and I love teaching and teachers. But we are dismayed at the stress that chips away at our fellow educators – often resulting in fatigue, bitterness, physical ailments, despondency and sometimes a change in careers. Here's how Brenda puts it:

As an assistant principal, I dealt with problems, issues and complaints of veteran teachers for years. When I went back to school and researched for my dissertation on teachers' attitudes and stress levels, I realised that the majority of the complaints could be changed by the teachers themselves. They have to understand that they have control of their environments and their own attitudes towards those obstacles. When they do, the whole picture of the teacher-on-the-road-to-burnout can change.

It took only one semester of teaching prospective teachers for me to learn how excited and passionate they were. It made me recall the excitement I once had for teaching children – a profession that actually rejuvenated my spirit. I believe strongly that all veteran teachers can recapture their love for teaching and rekindle the kind of passion demonstrated by these fresh, eager, soon-to-be teachers.

We created a book with your rejuvenation as its primary goal.

Believing that the stress and discouragement can be reversed – and that the passion for teaching, though shaken, still lies dormant in most educators – the two of us looked for ways to help educators rekindle their love of the profession. We were disappointed to find few resources. So we set out to create a comprehensive source for educators, with input from those folks on the front lines – the teachers themselves, your colleagues.

I come to you with a background of classroom teacher, curriculum specialist, principal, educational author and educational consultant. Dr Cole is the kind of vibrant maths and science teacher who can deliver a dynamic semester of physical science instruction with resources found at the supermarket. We both are so passionate about teaching that, even as administrators, we choose to continue working in classrooms. When she was a part of my administrative team for many years before going on to earn her doctorate degree, you could not wipe the silly grins off our faces as we passed each other in the school office – me dashing off to teach Year 8 English and Brenda running to the science lab.

- We wanted to share workable, tested ideas from practising teachers. So, for this book, we sought advice, comments, tips and viewpoints from real teachers. (You will find many of their names cited in the text, though some preferred to remain anonymous.) Examples in the book were taken from real settings in current classrooms. Chapters were constructed around issues that educators face on a daily basis.
- Laughter and joy must be a part of teaching. So, you will find jokes, anecdotes and amusing stories interspersed with research, best practices and plain old-fashioned common-sense solutions.
- Teachers need practical tools to do the kinds of things that make them more effective and their jobs more enjoyable. So we have ended each chapter with a hearty TOOLS section. These pages are full of ready-to-use tips and forms.
- Each chapter also contains one or more “Me Moments”. These are suggestions for pampering yourself – strictly for the purpose of de-stressing and nurturing the human part of you that needs refreshing.

If you have lost your joy for teaching ...

If you can't quite remember why you entered the profession ...

If you have need of an injection of positive energy ...

Then this is the book for you.

It can be the best of jobs; it can be the worst of jobs. But if you ask me, teachers are the luckiest people on earth; and we are all fortunate that there are those among us who answer the call to enter the teaching profession.



Chapter 1

Teacher Stress Is No Laughing Matter



Julianna Dunn works hard to live up to everyone's standards. She wants the principal to be pleased with her work, the parents to say only nice things about her, and the Year 3s to always remember her as their favourite teacher. She is the first to hand in lesson plans and volunteer for extra duties. Weekly, she writes personal notes home to each student's parents or guardians. On weekends, she spends hours creating enticing classes, projects and treats for her students. **Ms Dunn loves her job, but feels as if she is about to lose her mind.**

One thing Marita Russo likes about her job is the time she can spend with her own children. She often picks them up after school and brings them back to her classroom, where they finish their homework and help organise materials for her lessons the next day. School holidays and weekends give Marita time to comb through garage sales and Two-Dollar shops for classroom items, her children in tow. **Mrs Russo is pleased to have a profession that allows her to have this much time with her children; but why does she always feel so drained?**

Four years ago, Stephen Maas was delighted with his first group of lower secondary students. This year, he has noticed a disturbing difference. Even after a full night's sleep, he feels tired in the mornings. He has begun to ignore the alarm clock and get to school late. Before classes start, Stephen lingers in the staff room over his coffee cup until the last possible moment. He is ashamed to admit that some mornings he assigns the first period students busy work to give himself time to drum up enthusiasm for the day. **Mr Maas wonders: Where did all that excitement for teaching go?**

Do you see yourself in Ms Dunn, who is trying to be all things to all people, or in Mrs Russo, who has blurred the line between her personal and professional life, or in Mr Maas, who has lost his excitement for teaching? Can you remember the day you became a teacher and the exciting promise the profession brought – how you thought you would change lives, how you looked forward to the gleam of students' faces as they looked up to you for guidance? Do you remember the thrill you felt when students walked out of your classroom knowing something new?

Learn To Love Teaching Again

If those thoughts seem to be long-ago memories, if you find yourself exhausted and “run ragged” all of the time, or if you are considering a change of profession (to perhaps a master pumpkin grower), you could be overly stressed, headed toward teacher exhaustion or smack dab in the middle of a full-blown teacher meltdown.

Losing the Love



Once you get that first job, a host of situations, programs, people and processes turn into causes for disillusionment, disappointment and distress. Just about all of these could fall into the category of “stressors”. And too often, these realities build up an overload of true physical and mental stress – along with a gradual (or quick) slide away from the joys of teaching. Do you want a chance to hang on to or reclaim your passion for teaching? If so, you must pay attention to the stress in your life and gather some tools to help manage, diminish or eliminate it.

How Did We Get On the Top Ten List?

Job stress and burnout are hot topics. All kinds of media and institutional sources research, analyse and report the problem and its consequences. When researchers attempt to identify the highest-stress professions, educators are usually near the top of any list. These are just a few of many examples:

Top 10 Most Stressful Professions

1. air traffic controller
2. police officer
3. **teacher**
4. registered nurse
5. coal miner
6. surgeon
7. firefighter
8. correctional officer
9. pilot
10. US Marine

Carreercast.com, 2010

Top 10 Most Stressful Jobs

1. **inner-city high school teacher**
2. police officer
3. miner
4. air traffic controller
5. medical intern
6. stockbroker
7. journalist
8. customer service rep
9. secretary
10. waiter

Health Magazine, 2008

Top 10 Most Stressful Fields

1. information technology (IT)
2. medicine and other caring professions
3. engineering
4. sales and marketing
5. **education**
6. finance
7. human resources
8. operations
9. production
10. clerical

JobBank USA, 2010

Chapter 1: Teacher Stress Is No Laughing Matter

According to the report, "The Scale of Occupational Stress: further analysis of the impact of demographic factors and type of job" (2000), 41.5 percent of teachers reported themselves highly stressed. Without question, a teacher has one of the most important jobs in any country. As educators, we prepare our students for their futures, as well as our futures and the future of the society. However, today's teachers are faced with more complex challenges than at any other time in the history of education. The challenges that tax teachers every day can (and do) become overwhelming. Many teachers are stressed by the daily tasks of running their classrooms, because they have lost the belief that they can make a difference.

Why does the field of education consistently show up on these lists of most stressful professions? According to real teachers on the job, these are some of the factors that make the profession highly stressful:

- high expectations and low pay
- too much to do and too little time
- growing pressure from school administration and education departments to show achievement results
- difficult relationships with parents
- the challenges of managing today's students
- increased emphasis on and importance of national tests
- seemingly endless, burdensome paperwork
- bureaucratic regulations, meetings and requirements
- constant change in expectations and programs
- job insecurity and unexpected changes in assignments
- lack of career advancement opportunities
- loads of take-home work, making the balancing of home and work responsibilities exceptionally difficult
- lack of support

In addition, schools often lack the funds to support good instruction, so teachers end up using money from their own pockets for school supplies and instructional materials. This adds to their personal financial burden – which adds fuel to personal stress. After years of buying supplies, many teachers feel resentful and angry at their school officials and education departments.

Another trend disheartens teachers. For a long time, educators were admired and respected. Parents stood behind teachers, and children knew any disciplinary infraction at school would also be dealt with at home. But this is no longer the case. In recent decades, there has been a negative shift in the attitude of many parents toward the teaching profession. So an already stressful situation is made worse by the lack of respect and appreciation.

On the Lookout for Stress

Stress is a reaction to an intimidating or threatening situation. A stressed reaction is a heightened physical reaction in which the body is prepared to take some sort of action to alleviate the pressure. That action may not be healthy (like reaching for a cigarette or a bag of potato chips), but a person is galvanised to do **something**. The education profession is loaded with stressors – situations, events and feelings that induce the physical responses of stress. This fact has serious implications for the health and well-being of each educator, as well as for the students they teach and the families they touch.

Quick Teacher Stress Self-Check List

- ___ The school principal has your home and mobile number on speed dial.
- ___ In order to live with you, your cat is on prescription anti-anxiety medication.
- ___ People have trouble understanding you, because you always talk through clenched teeth.
- ___ You don't have time to wait for a microwavable meal at lunchtime.
- ___ Your "To-Do" list includes weaning your four-year-old off decaf.
- ___ You need to consult your planner to see if you have time to take out the trash.

If you ticked any of these items, you definitely need to explore some stress-reducing strategies.



Physical Changes Due to Stress

The body reacts to stress by a “fight-or-flight” response, sometimes called the *stress response*. So when a human perceives something as dangerous or as extremely stressful, physical changes occur immediately.

- The brain triggers the release of hormones that prepare the heart, lungs, skin, circulation, metabolism and immune system to fight or flee approaching danger.
- Chemical messengers are activated, instigating an emotional response such as fear, anxiety or anger.
- Chemicals suppress the area of the brain that controls short-term memory, concentration, inhibition and rational thought – allowing the body’s resources to concentrate on response to the danger.
- Heart rate and blood pressure increase instantly; the lungs take in more oxygen, causing breathing to quicken; the spleen releases more blood cells to help the blood transport more oxygen; and blood flow may increase from 300–400 percent.
- The fight-or-flight response system cuts off any body function not directly needed to repel the perceived threat. Instead of digesting your food in your stomach, growing fingernails or hair or even fighting off cancer cells, the body focuses on getting out of the stress situation.
- The immune system is stimulated, redistributing white blood cells to fight off impending infection.
- Fluids are relocated from the throat and mouth. This causes the mouth to dry and makes it difficult to speak or make a sound (such as a scream). The throat spasms, making it hard to swallow.
- As blood is redirected from the skin to support the heart and muscle tissues, the skin can become cool and clammy. Sweat may break out.
- The scalp can tighten, which is why you see cartoons that show a person’s hair standing up when they experience a stressful situation.



Menu for a Stress-Free Diet

I. BREAKFAST:

- 1/2 grapefruit
- 1 slice whole wheat toast
- skim milk

II. LUNCH:

- lean broiled chicken breast
- 1 cup steamed spinach
- 1 cup herb tea
- 1 Oreo biscuit

III. MID-AFTERNOON SNACK:

- The rest of Oreos in the pack
- 1 Litre Rocky Road ice cream, nuts, cherries and whipped cream
- 1 jar hot fudge sauce

IV. DINNER:

- 2 loaves garlic bread
- 4 cans or 1 large pitcher Coke
- 1 large, meat lovers pizza (extra meat)
- 3 Snickers bars

V. DESSERT:

- 1 entire frozen Sara Lee cheesecake (eaten directly from the freezer)

Effects of Ongoing Stress

The fight-or-flight response is a lifesaver in dangerous situations. But the body was not meant to live in that state. When this response is activated constantly (by continuous daily pressure of a stressful work environment), the option to fight or flee is minimised, if not eradicated. Chronic stress wreaks havoc on the body – leaving it less able to respond to a stressful situation appropriately and leading to a litany of health problems. When we function under chronic stress, we are then doing little that is healthy or helpful to our students, our families and most importantly – ourselves.

A chronic release of stress hormones can destroy brain cells over time. This can also tax the immune system, cause depression and interfere with mental processes. Living in a continuous fight-or-flight response mode with increased heart rate and blood pressure can harm the heart and cardiovascular system. Other serious health issues, such as diabetes and even cancer, are associated with the effects of stress (Brantley, 2003).

Stress also has a strong correlation to weight gain, because it reduces the body's ability to absorb nutrients effectively, thereby affecting the body's metabolism. Research has shown that stress alters the body's level of coenzymes that help convert food to energy the cells can use. This is worsened by the reality that busy, stressed people don't have time to think about eating well, and frequently grab easy, accessible junk food such as burgers and pizza (Chichester and Garfinkel, 1997).

Many people reach for food in an attempt to soothe their stress, expecting that eating will make them feel better. Unfortunately, the food choices tend to be full of fats and sugars, have little nutritional value and include excessive caffeine or alcohol. These foods do not reduce stress or address the bad feelings. What they often do is set up a roller-coaster sugar ride – along with feelings of heaviness, bloating and guilt. When people make such food choices to relieve tension, they get the opposite result – increased tension, unstable moods, depression and long-term health problems (Davidson, 2003).

Teacher-to-Teacher Tip

"Before I became a teacher I wish I had known that it would be such a stressful job! So I suggest that you make a point of planning some 'down time' for yourself during the day – even if it is just for a few minutes. That time is just as important as creating lessons or preparing for assessments."

*– Classroom teacher
with 21 years experience*