Stress Management for Teachers: A Practical Approach

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The stress management program that I describe here has been evolving for the past fifteen years. It was recently part of a teacher enrichment program at P.S. 26 in the Bronx, funded by a New York State Chapter 1 grant, “Rewarding Success.” P.S. 26, with 1,900 students, is one of the largest elementary schools in New York City and is made up almost entirely of students from minority groups.

The cooperation and feedback of the principal, program coordinator, and many of the teachers at P.S. 26 made this article possible. Numerous insights and techniques described here evolved from the interactions between course participants and leaders. This program is only one of many possible models for a course in stress management and relaxation techniques (see Charleworth and Nathan 1985; Davis, McKay, and Eshelman 1980; Nathan, Staats, and Rosch 1989; Smith 1986, 1989). However, it has emerged over the years as a simple, nonintrusive program that has been effective. This article, which is currently being translated into Spanish, is intended as an easily accessible, how-to description for harried, inner-city teachers. Follow-up research studies are in progress that compare participants’ ability to relax with a control group of nonparticipants.

Signs of Stress in Teaching

One of the major problems that teachers face is the constant stream of interruptions and distractions in their classrooms (see also Zeutra et al. 1988). Besides being a major source of stress in itself, this state of affairs also makes it unusually difficult for teachers to monitor and recognize the early warning signs of negative stress—they are always preoccupied with several things happening at the same time (see also Albertson and Kagan 1987; Feitler and Tokar 1982; Fimian 1987a; Greenberg 1984; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe 1978; Swick and Hanley 1985).

In addition, teachers are isolated in small rooms with many students for long periods, making it difficult for them to get time for themselves. Nevertheless, it is imperative that teachers be trained to scan constantly for physical, mental, or behavioral signs of stress in themselves, no matter how difficult this may seem during the press of the teaching day.

Any stress management program for teachers must help individuals remain alert for tell-tale symptoms (see Peters, Benson, and Porter 1977). This awareness, it is hoped, will enable them to use the stress reduction techniques outlined here. These techniques mitigate against the accumulation of negative stress, a state that often leads to teacher burnout if left uncorrected. (For more on teacher burnout see Alshuler et al. 1984; Anderson 1984; Farber and Miller 1981; Gold 1988; Grossnickle 1980; Hock 1988; McNeely 1983; Seldman and Zager 1988; Spaniol and Caputto 1980; Sweeney 1981.)

Course participants agreed that the following symptoms are the warning signs of high levels of stress. The categories of physical, mental, and behavioral are overlapping, and several of these symptoms could have been placed differently. (For a more extensive discussion see Nathan, Staats, and Rosch 1989.)

Physical Symptoms

1. Shallow and/or rapid breathing, deep sighing, holding breath unconsciously.
2. Fast heartbeat (pulse of eighty or more).
3. Signs of a headache “creeping” in: hunched-over shoulders; knotted neck and shoulder muscles; stress on your temples and forehead; pressure behind your eyes, in your sinuses, etc.
4. Increased muscle tension (curling toes, tensed jaw muscles, back pain, gritting or grinding of teeth, etc.); frowning (smiling actually occurs when facial muscles are relaxed).
5. Cold feet or hands. One of the effects of the fight-or-flight response is to direct blood away from extremities and into the major muscle groups and vital organs.

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Mental confusion.

6. Increased sensitivity to sound/light; dilated pupils.
7. Ringing in the ears, light-headedness, dizziness, or faintness.
8. Skin hives or rashes, nervous scratching, eczema.
9. Weight loss or gain, loss of appetite or nervous eating.
10. Dry mouth, problems swallowing.
11. Frequent colds or bouts with the flu. (Constant stress weakens the immune system and depletes vitamins, especially vitamin C.)
12. Sudden, suffocating panic, general sense of anxiety angst/insecurity, inability to breathe normally.
13. Gaseousness and belching, frequent urination, constipation, nervous diarrhea.

If the above list seems extensive, imagine what would happen to your car engine, for example, if you kept it running at extremely high speed—at speeds normally used only for passing and emergency situations—for days, months, or years! Then imagine the inevitable chain of problems that would result from the incredible inner temperature and pressure. The list of damaged systems and parts to your car would also be extensive, and the higher the engine speed and the longer it continued, the greater the damage.

The human body is extremely well “engineered” and has amazing self-healing properties (Benson 1985). Nevertheless, if we keep ourselves constantly in the fight-or-flight response mode, we will also experience pervasive systems and parts failure. (This mode of maximum-level response was probably developed in our primordial ancestors to cope with intense but brief emergency situations in their battle for physical survival; see Seyle 1976.)

Of course, the human condition is only partially represented by the above analogy because we also possess a psychological/intellectual dimension not shared with automobiles. The following list represents some of these signs of negative (or harmful) stress.

Mental Symptoms

1. Nervousness, anxiety, worry, guilt.
2. Moodiness, instability of emotions.
3. Depression, pessimistic thinking.
4. Racing thoughts, problems with concentration, trouble learning new information, forgetfulness.
5. Nightmares.
6. Difficulty making decisions, disorganization or confusion.
7. A sense of being overwhelmed or overloaded—intensely resenting, and feeling frustrated by, any new demands, even small ones.
9. Fear of getting close to people, loneliness.
10. A sense of never being good enough; being displeased and critical of one’s ability and progress; maintaining a negative and judgmental inner dialogue.

In addition to the above physical and mental symptoms, there are also behavioral signs of negative stress.

Behavioral Symptoms

1. Inattention to dress or grooming.
3. A more serious appearance than usual.
4. Unusual behavior, nervous habits such as finger or foot tapping, nervous twitches.
5. Rushing around, increased number of small accidents, driving car aggressively, cursing others or oneself, speeding and driving “on the edge.”
6. Edginess, increased frustration and irritability, overreaction to small things, general sense of anger, low “flash point.”
7. Inability to be soft and caring toward students, friends, and loved ones; rudeness.
8. Reduced work efficiency or productivity, the feeling of always having one’s “nose just above water,” always “fighting brush fires” with no energy left over for other needed projects, just barely able to cope, “surviving” from day to day.
10. Constant tiredness/sleep problems.
11. Frequent use of over-the-counter drugs.
12. Increased use of alcohol/drugs/tobacco.
13. Gambling or overspending.

The above lists of symptoms are not exhaustive. One of the first activities we undertake during the stress management course is to go over the lists together and add and delete symptoms, as the participating teachers feel necessary.

The Stress Management Program

It has been documented that teaching may subject an individual to negative stress (see Coates and Thoresen 1976; Edgerton 1977; Jameson 1980; Parkey et al. 1988; Swick 1989; Wasserman 1984). Techniques for managing such negative stress will be briefly outlined below.

Quick Responses and Classroom Strategies

1. Back-off, try to focus on your breathing and take five to ten slow, deep breaths.
2. Relax your muscles with tension-and-relax cycles or use recall-relaxation exercises (Nathan, Staats, and Rosch 1989).
3. Give yourself a five-second “calm pause” before reacting to irritations with students or colleagues.
4. Be aware of your heart-center and focus on the middle of your chest rather than on your mind or head; to relieve pressure in your head imagine you are letting air out of an overfilled balloon—through your nose, ears, and mouth.

5. Do a visualization of a peaceful scene; take a "mini-vacation" if you have a few minutes.

6. Remember your true values and put small obstacles in perspective.

7. Catch your negative, critical, or blaming thoughts. Use "thought-stopping" by mentally flashing a red STOP! sign; don't disparage yourself; monitor your internal dialogue.

8. Become more stress resistant by having a positive self-image, repeating positive affirmations, re-affirming your faith and beliefs.

9. Use a sense of humor; be compassionate when you notice the situation comedies/tragedies in your work environment.

10. Make healthy changes in your classroom to reduce stressful surroundings and conditions; have students help sweep floors, arrange desks, erase blackboards; perhaps have an aquarium or plants.


12. Use the broken-record technique and calmly repeat your requests.

13. Say no (if at all possible) to stressful requests from co-workers and administrators. Calmly "sandbag" (i.e., give a noncommittal, vague answer) or politely ignore the people who are making the requests.

14. If possible, take a break by changing the class activity.

15. Use methods to help students relieve their stress: institute a "quiet minute" in the room before starting; have a brief rest with soothing music or a story. Some classes might need stretching, yoga, or calisthenics to calm down.

In addition to the above remedies, any extra or in-between time can be used to "center" oneself. Consider doing relaxation exercises between classes, before and after school, when sitting in the car before turning the motor on or after turning it off, when riding on the subway or bus, or in other waiting or in-between situations (even in the rest room/WC!)

**Life-Style Changes to Reduce Stress**

1. Teaching is a profession that often leaves one psychologically tired, although the body may not be. It is important therefore for teachers to exercise regularly, in order to balance mind and body. In addition, exercise is nature’s best relaxer. The search for inner peace must be balanced by outer health and dynamism (this is true for students as well as for teachers). Consider some activities that have proved beneficial: stretching/yoga, jogging, walking, weight training, swimming, tennis, or aerobics.

2. Diet is extremely important. Stress-inducing foods such as coffee, sugar, tobacco, some seasonings, and foods that one is overly sensitive to should be avoided. Meal times should be quiet and relaxed, food should be chewed thoroughly and not gulped down. Don’t drink too much coffee or soda pop, smoke tobacco, or nervously eat snacks in the teacher’s room. To control your weight, make small permanent changes in what, when, and how you eat.

3. In course discussions, we came to believe there was such a thing as "TV stress." Passive television watching can be a source of stress when you don’t leave enough time to do other necessary activities. TV also emits radiation, electromagnetic fields, and loud, stressful noise (especially commercials). Many TV shows (especially when watched in succession) are overstimulating: it is hard to center yourself after being subjected to fast-paced, constant action and stressful conditions such as violence, sex, killing, horror, and torture. Also, conflict is created when people can’t agree to watch the same program; give in sometimes, or do another relaxing activity, or maybe get another TV (or get rid of it altogether!). Don’t let TV dictate your schedule; don’t stay up too late and allow your daily rhythm to be destroyed.

4. Monitor your other forms of entertainment. Sometimes what was fun at night makes us feel bad in the morning. We should feel relaxed, refreshed, and happy, not tired, depressed, or in anguish. Don’t continually interrupt your biorhythms just to forget a stressful day or to have "fun."

5. Be careful about the social situations you put yourself in. Don’t passively mix with people whom you don’t really like, who “bring you down,” or who are negative influences (if it can be avoided). Choose friends carefully and stand by them.

6. Share your problems, but don’t bring your work home and let it overwhelm the rest of your life. Develop the ability to make clean transitions from one setting or situation to another.

7. Leave enough time to get to work without rushing and take the most convenient and least stressful form of transportation.

8. If you feel the need for professional assistance, form a “partnership” with a competent, caring physician who emphasizes “skills rather than pills.” More doctors are realizing that a holistic view of health is preferable to the strictly chemical or surgical “curing” of sickness and disease after they have occurred (see Benson 1985).

Be aware, however, that the general diagnosis of “stress induced” is becoming an easy label for doctors to use today, just as the vague diagnosis of “allergy” or “virus” has been previously. Also, a diagnosis of stress can imply that the problem is not serious or that the patient is somehow to blame. Seek out physicians who are committed to a holistic approach to preventing and treating stress (see Nathan, Staats, and Rosch 1989).
The Centering Technique: A Primary Weapon against Stress

The technique of centering is the focal point of this stress management program for teachers. One practical centering technique that has proved effective—and that will be described here—is called the "calm technique" by Wilson (1989), the "relaxation response" by Benson (1975), or centering or meditation (Chinmoy 1987; Goleman 1988; Smith 1986; Wallace and Benson 1972).

Centering should be done at the beginning and end of each school day. Teachers in the program felt that it was both possible and highly beneficial to take this time. Unfortunately, some people lack the will power or are not motivated enough; they don't realize how much good it would do them. The overwhelming response of those who did take the time and effort was that the technique has effectively helped them manage stress.

The first requirement for the successful implementation of this technique is the participants' commitment. Be prepared to do it regularly for a six-week period, in order to get a fair evaluation. You must be convinced that, for this period of time, you will give priority to the centering activity and will definitely set aside time for the activity daily. Center yourself at least twice a day for ten to twenty minutes: first in the morning after brushing your teeth and washing up (preferable as early as possible—for example, at 6 a.m.—keeping the same time every day) and then after coming home from school. If possible, it is also advisable to center yourself for a few minutes in the middle of the work day, at lunch. Remember the following points:

Preparation

1. Initially, focus attention on neutral yet inspiring objects such as a candle flame, a beautiful, serene picture, and/or some fresh flowers. Some people also listen to relaxing music or burn incense (if it doesn't seem too exotic or doesn't irritate your breathing).

2. Keep clean and uncluttered the area of your room at home where the centering technique is practiced.

3. Wash up. Symbolically wash away everything of the school day; change to clean, loose-fitting clothes.

4. If you are either sleepy or tense, do simple yoga/stretching/massage to relax your body and get blood circulating.

5. Do a simple breathing exercise such as breathing in "peace" and breathing out "tension," repeating the exercise five to ten times slowly and rhythmically.

6. Keep your backbone straight, shoulders and arms relaxed, hands loosely on your lap; keep your head up, eyes straight ahead (even if they close).

7. Focus calmly on the object (or sound-word, as described later), and limit your attention exclusively to it.

The Process of Centering

1. Focus. Focus on your chosen inspiring object. (Eventually, the object of inspiration may be internalized, when one "goes beyond" the object.)

2. Concentrate. Do not tense up and give yourself a headache focusing on the object; simply try to concentrate on it in a relaxed manner. If your attention strays, no matter; just return to the object as soon as you are aware that you have strayed. If thoughts come, just let them come and go; do not follow them, even if they are positive and interesting—that would be daydreaming, not centering. If your eyes close, or you "go beyond" the object somehow and lose track of time and place, don't worry. This is precisely the aim and purpose of the centering activity.

3. Going beyond everyday consciousness. When a person transcends or goes beyond normal, everyday consciousness and enters an unfamiliar, albeit peaceful state, the conscious mind seems to become insecure and tries to draw back to the known and familiar, away from the unknown. Familiar thoughts and distractions suddenly reappear. Therefore, when you experience a peace and deep relaxation "beyond understanding" (at least in terms of past experience) during centering, you will continually be stopped short and brought back to your "normal" awareness by the mind.

4. Remaining centered. At this point just calmly and peacefully begin the whole sequence again: refocus on the object (open your eyes if they have closed), and gently begin concentrating again. As you get more used to centering, you can stay "away" or "beyond" the mind's active state for longer periods. The centering technique has a cyclical nature: (1) focusing, (2) transcending the object, (3) experiencing deep silence and peace, (4) being brought back to everyday awareness by the mind, and (5) once again, peacefully refocusing and continuing on. The cycle will become a familiar and automatic sequence over years of practice. Accomplished individuals who can remain for hours in this transcendent state report experiences of great peace, rejuvenation, and being centered when they return to everyday awareness (e.g., Benson, 1975, 1979, 1985; Goleman 1988; Wilson 1989).

5. Dealing with persistent distractions. If persistent thoughts or distractions continue to disturb the process, merely introduce a word-sound to occupy the "thought-mechanism" (i.e., the mind). The word-sound tends to squeeze-out the unwanted visitors: repeat this word over and over so these distractions have no place to stay (e.g., Benson 1975). This technique is used in modern times by psychologists and, historically, by virtually all religions (e.g., worry beads, rosaries, or the repetition of rituals, phrases, or chants). Typical word-sounds or affirmations are peace, calm-ing, and joy or other simple and inspiring sounds, words, or phrases (Benson 1975; Smith 1986; Wilson 1989).
6. Thoughts. In general, the most helpful attitude to maintain toward thoughts is that they will not disturb us. Think of the mind as being deep and peaceful, like the brilliant blue sky. Thoughts are like birds that fly in the sky yet leave no trail or trace; they don’t disturb—they merely come and go in the vastness and peacefulness.

7. Stopping. After finishing the centering experience, you will need enough time to gradually return to an everyday state of awareness. Don’t rush immediately into new activities. If possible, remain sitting quietly, or lie down, perhaps listening to music.

Conclusion

Through centering, one finds peace deep within, and one is able to bring stability and calm into daily life. This is particularly important for teachers, who must function in the midst of interruptions, ambiguities, and conflicting demands.

By centering themselves, becoming aware of their inner dialogue, and making positive lifestyle changes, teachers become more stress resistant. This is the goal of all stress management programs. Everyone has stress in their lives, but we can learn to cope with it and grow from it. In fact, this appears to be what life is all about: learning to grow and flourish in the face of resistance.

Teachers are justifiably demanding a greater role in governing their schools, but they must also realize that they already are in control of their own inner environment, if they take the time and make the effort. Each teacher’s everyday thoughts, words, and actions take on new and greater significance. In our own small sphere we truly do contribute peace to our world. Indeed, to teachers, this is the ultimate meaning of the word empowerment.

REFERENCES


