

Coping with teacher burnout.

The incidence of stress and burnout are usually high for human service professionals, including teachers. Stress describes negative feelings resulting from work that may include anger, frustration, tension and/or depression that threaten a professional's sense of well-being (Kyriacou, 2001; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Burnout refers to negative consequences associated with chronic job stress. It involves affective components such as exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Huebner, Gilligan & Cobb, 2002). Survey data suggests that teaching is considered a 'high stress' profession, where approximately one quarter of schoolteachers view teaching as extremely stressful (Kyriacou, 2001). Consequences of stress and burnout are damaging for teachers, students and the education field in general. During the school year, stress can lead to a higher frequency of absenteeism (Griffith, Steptoe & Cropley, 1999) and burnout may lead teachers to retire early, leaving the profession and reducing the number of competent teachers available to teach and serve children.

Kyriacou (2001) delineated ten of the main sources of teacher stress:

- Teaching pupils who lack motivation;
- Maintaining discipline;
- Time pressures and workload;
- Coping with change;
- Being evaluated by others;
- Dealings with colleagues;
- Self-esteem and status;
- Administration and management;
- Role conflict and ambiguity;
- Poor working conditions.

Of course, sources of stress for individual teachers will be unique and dependent on both the characteristics of that particular teacher and factors in that teacher's professional and personal life. However, the above listed areas represent potential sources of stress for teachers that may need to be addressed.

Coping strategies

Kyriacou (2001) dichotomizes coping strategies into direct action and palliative techniques. Direct action refers to strategies teachers can do to eliminate sources of stress. For instance, if time pressures and deadlines are creating stress, a direct action to reduce the problem would be to seek a time extension, or to seek a change in deadline. Palliative techniques do not deal with the source of stress itself, but focus on reducing the feelings of stress from those sources. Some strategies may be physical in nature, such as relaxation training aimed at reducing feelings of tension and anxiety. Others may be mental and involve the teacher modifying how they appraise stressful situations.

- Try to keep problems in perspective;

- Avoid confrontations;
- Try to relax after work;
- Take action to deal with problems;
- Keeping feelings under control;
- Devote more time to particular tasks;
- Discuss problems and express feelings to others;
- Have a healthy home life;
- Plan ahead and prioritize;
- Recognize ones own limitations.

These strategies consist of both direct action and palliative techniques. Direct action may appear the best strategy for reducing job stress. However, sometimes these strategies may not be possible to implement. In that case, helpful, palliative techniques are critical.

Cognitive restructuring techniques

Techniques borrowed from cognitive therapy may be one type of palliative technique that can help teachers reduce job-related stress. Howard and Johnson (2004) demonstrate that much of what teachers who work with difficult children do to reduce their own feelings of stress revolve around how they think of stressful situations at school. Moreover, teachers who leave a school (or the profession) after teaching difficult children show certain characteristics. For instance, they may blame students or colleagues for perceived failure to cope with difficulties in school, or appear to be overwhelmed by their students’ personal problems.

Situation	Emotion(s)	Thoughts
Class not paying attention. I had to repeat myself numerous times to get students' attention.	Frustration	It is impossible to teach this class

In this example, a teacher was feeling frustrated in a situation where he could not get his class to pay attention. He remembers thinking that it was impossible to teach this particular class of children. Undoubtedly anyone would feel frustrated in such a situation, however thinking that he was in an impossible situation likely exacerbated his emotional response, creating more stress and frustration for him. Perhaps if he re-evaluated the situation, he might have noticed that only some students were actually not paying attention; it would be inaccurate to say that the whole class was off-task. Additionally, it is likely that even students that feel “impossible” to teach have learned a number of things through out the year.

In order to reduce negative emotions associated with stress (like frustration) it can be helpful for teachers to change how they think about stress-inducing situations. One way to do so is to construct different ways to conceptualize these situations in a way that refutes, or is incompatible with current thoughts. For instance, it is not possible for the teacher in the previous example to think that the class is impossible to teach, and that only a group of students in the class is difficult to teach. They can not both be correct statements. The fact that just a group of students is difficult refutes the idea that it is the whole class that is the problem. Understanding that these difficult students have learned something through out the year is at odds with the idea that it is impossible to teach them. It is possible to know if these new thoughts are truly incompatible with the old ones if they start to decrease feelings of stress and frustration.

Often thoughts that lead to problems are distorted in some way. Below is a list of common thought distortions that may be refuted in this process (Spiegler & Guevremont, 2003).

Distortion	Definition
Arbitrary inference	Drawing conclusions without sufficient evidence, or when evidence is contradictory
Overgeneralization	Drawing a conclusion based on just one incidence
Selective abstraction	Attending to a detail while ignoring the entire context of a situation.
Personalization	Wrongly attributing the cause of an event to yourself rather than to something else beyond your direct control.
Dichotomous thinking	Thinking in all-or-none, black or white, fashion
Magnification or minimization	Very something as far more important (or less important)

than it really is.

The teacher in the previous example may be demonstrating a number of these distortions. It may be that when he proclaimed that his whole class was impossible, he was not including *all* his students in his assessment of the situation. If that was the case it was demonstrating an arbitrary inference. Additionally, the word “impossible” may reflect dichotomous thinking. Perhaps this teacher thinks students either learn without any difficulty, or they cannot be taught. Thus, the teacher is not considering any gray areas between these two extremes.

Remember that this technique takes practice and consistent use for it to begin to be effective. It may be beneficial to begin using it after the school day when it is possible to take a few minutes to reflect on the day’s events. With practice, it will be helpful to begin using these techniques during stressful situations, not just after they have subsided.

References

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