

CAN TEACHERS REDUCE THEIR STRESS?

Taken from:

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Pre-reading questions

1. What events can be stressful for you? Give some examples.
2. What generally causes the stress?
3. Name three jobs that are highly stressful. Discuss the choice with your classmates.

Stress can be defined as an abnormal emotional or physical reaction to demanding stressful events which interfere with our accustomed way of life. Whether the situation will be stressful usually depends on the person's subjective appraisal of the event and, in a way, on his/her previous experience with a similar case. Stress seems to be everywhere as the interfering environmental stressors make the physical and emotional demands on us more and more unbearable.

Teaching belongs among stressful professions because it brings constant changes and new facts every day to both pupils and teachers, and it actually never ends. Educators can hardly ever say to themselves: "Oh, well done, I am finished. I am through. I have completed my job." For their job actually never ends.

And so their stress, which is frequently experienced as a constant worry – "Am I on time (in line with) with the syllabus?" "Have I explained the new topic in an easy-to-follow way?" "Oh, no, it's the bell again; time to go back to the classroom?" "I always seem to fall behind, never coping with my stuff," etc. It is good to know that teachers need to set realistic time-scales and say 'No' when they have to. However, are these stressful situations really so tragic?

The complaints about stress in a teaching job very often seem to be a never-ending story. In some cases teachers can, in a way, even blame it on themselves. They compete with their colleagues to be the best of the best, submitting their tasks to school principals quite well ahead of the deadline; they try to be perfectionists, insisting on every smallest detail, they voluntarily enlarge their teaching load in order to make more money, take extra classes, part-time jobs, etc.

On the other hand, it is fair to say that female teachers are in a worse situation, having to look after their families, help their children with homework, do shopping, cooking, washing, ironing, you name it, with much less time to relax after work when compared with male teachers.

But unless teachers set realistic boundaries for their tasks, they will constantly live with stress. Take, for example, one of the school inspectors' requirements - to be strictly in line and on time with the syllabus.

The national syllabus for primary schools is essential, yet in some cases, there may even appear a necessity for a justified delay in the course programme. The delay can, undoubtedly, be rectified in a couple of days by enhanced efforts, and may even bring some benefit to the pupils. Furthermore, an important fact is to understand that teachers simply cannot pass all the knowledge onto their disciples, and that not all of their students are able to grasp the new material entirely.

And what is more, prolonged exposure to stress can lead to depression, migraine headaches, heart disease, stomach disorders and ulcers, and other stress-induced long-term illnesses. To put it shortly, the school bell could very easily turn into the passing-bell. Yes, there is an implied piece of wisdom in stopping trying to finish a job that is already defined as never ending.

There is no doubt that many situations in schools can lead to stressful events. People differ, and so do teachers. What may cause stress in one person can easily be overcome by another with a smile. One may consider hair-pulling as violence against girls, or even bullying, the other might see it as a demonstration (or an example) of affection or favour towards the opposite sex.

Of course, it depends on circumstances. Some people may work better under pressure; they are high in commitment, control, more alert, energetic and they always need fresh challenges. On the other hand, it is widely known that too little stress and too few challenges in life can also lead to certain problems.

Can the negative effects of stress be reduced? The most predictable answer would probably be: Yes, they should! Compared with men, women developed a unique way out of these situations. They talk the stressful situation out, voice it by sharing their problems with somebody, or even better, with a close friend of theirs. And in most cases it helps.

Men tend to hide the problem inside, trying to find the solution by themselves and sinking under the burden of worsening stressful events. Another way could be defined as an attempt to determine the stressor. Have you got a problem? Just name it.

How to tackle stress? To cope with stress effectively, we need to evaluate the situation first. There are some well-known recommendations for immediate relief, such as deep breathing, taking a long soak in a bath, or talking about the problem with someone you can trust.

Some long-term remedies might include taking up some sporting activities, hobbies, or just avoiding stressful circumstances if possible. Also, it has been proved that people cope with stressful situations better when they feel that they can exercise some degree of control rather than being passive and helpless victims. The loud music coming from your flatmate's stereo is probably not so stressful and irritating as the same kind of music coming from your neighbour's next door.

Just knowing that you can control the noise makes it less vexatious. Also, unpleasant events tend to be less stressful if they are predictable – if you at least know when they will occur so that you can get ready for them. E.g., when a school inspector is to come to your school, it is less traumatic if his or her arrival is announced to the staff beforehand than if it is a kind of sudden "hold-up".

Until now it was generally believed that to keep fit and healthy people should attempt to avoid stress in their lives. However, this approach can be quite limiting and brings people only a restricted amount of beneficial changes and challenge. A reasonable portion of stress could bring in some more stimulation and result in potentially positive progress.

Everyone needs to come to terms with stress in his or her own way, sometimes trying to avoid it, sometimes coping with it, and sometimes seeing it as a challenge. At issue is which techniques should be used to reduce the harmful and unhealthy side effects of stress.

After-reading questions

1. Why is teaching viewed as a stressful profession?
2. Which illnesses may develop as a result of continuous stress?
3. Which recommendations on coping with stress are mentioned in the text?
4. Do you believe that stress can have positive effects?

Match the definitions with the expressions

1	a successful way of curing an illness/dealing with a difficulty	a	to avoid
2	prevent sth from happening/not allow yourself to do sth	b	commitment
3	to discuss sth such as a problem or plan in order to find a solution or an agreement	c	remedy
4	too painful or unpleasant for you to continue to experience	d	to tackle
5	something that you must do or deal with	e	talk sth out
6	deal with sth/sb	f	unbearable

Key:

1c, 2a, 3e, 4f, 5b, 6d

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