

Combatting day-to-day stress: six strategies for teachers

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Introduction

Read stories about the teaching profession and you won't have to explore very far to read about the excesses of workload and the stresses that attend the job. Bleak tales of falling recruitment and issues with retention should give us pause, but we should be vigilant to not stigmatise the profession and lose sight of the fact that many of our daily stresses we can better manage and that we should not forget our many daily uplifts. To a significant degree, confidently managing our daily stresses is within our power.

What do we mean by stress?

There is a significant difference between the chronic stress that requires clinical help and the daily stresses that beset our busy lives as teachers. Where the boundary between manageable and chronic stress resides is a difficult question to answer.

Too many small, seemingly manageable stresses and we can suffer from hypertension. Get stressed too often and our blood flow damages our blood vessels, kills neurons in our brain and damages our judgement. Crucially, our daily stresses can be better managed with effective strategies we can deploy and with well-timed support.

Here is my selection of just some of the simple ways we can seize control of our negative stresses, with an emphasis on our living, breathing and no doubt tired physical selves:

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Combatting day-to-day stress: six strategies for teachers

1. Straighten up
2. Eat smart
3. Sleep
4. Use your network
5. Write and reflect
6. Get a life

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1. Straighten up

After a long day, our pulse rate and adrenaline has surged and settled over and over, and we are spent. The sheer weight of the day can fall upon our shoulders and we slump with tiredness. It is the same in every staffroom the world over.

The problem? Our natural response to the tiredness and stress of the school day: a hunched posture, or slumping in our chair, can worsen our mood and compound our stresses. The simple act of sitting upright in our chair can raise our mood in the face of stress.¹ Just being conscious of sitting up straight can make a small difference.

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2. Eat smart

A tired and hungry teacher simply cannot exercise all of their skills effectively. And yet, teachers the world over are working through their lunchtimes, hunched over a computer, punching in data, finishing lesson plans and thereby damaging their performance in the afternoon, before no doubt impacting upon their evening too.

When we are tired and negatively stressed, we worsen the situation by being attracted to the calorific and high-sugar snacks that give us a quick boost but ultimately see us crash all too speedily.

Take breakfast. You haul yourself out of bed and pour yourself a strong coffee, perhaps aided and abetted by some sugar-fuelled cereal. You reach work, but your early surge has already dimmed. That caffeine is coursing through your bloodstream triggering the release of the stress hormone: cortisol. This state of artificial stress and readiness can prove exhausting. You have no reserves left for teaching your classes.

I admit my hypocrisy here. I am an inveterate coffee drinker. I love the stuff. I can't shake the habit, but I am getting better at managing it. I have eliminated sugar from my coffee and cut down on the sugary snacks. I now eat fruit during the day for a natural glucose boost. It has been a steady and small change in my diet, but such marginal gains matter.

A check on the Web will see you find a cornucopia of advice about a balanced nutritional diet. Simple habits, like drinking more water, or substituting the chocolate and cakes for fruit, are within our reach. They will have the attendant benefit of feeding us with the fuel that can help us strive for greater competence and confidence.

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3. Sleep

It is Sunday night (I bet you know where I am going with this) and your lesson planning isn't quite finished, but you have done enough. You have ticked a few other jobs off your to-do list and you aim for a relatively early night. After an hour of lying in bed, turning endlessly, desperate

to claim some sleep, your negative stress level rises like heat. You stop looking at the clock and you know that the rest of your week will not catch up and claim back these lost hours.

It is the fear and loathing known by teachers the world over. Even if you enjoy teaching and you find working with your colleagues and students a profound pleasure, you can still experience this unique feeling of anxiety that clings to Sunday nights and to the ends of our school holidays.

Again, we need to recognise what our body is doing and why. If we are to live until ninety years of age, then we will spend an estimated thirty-two of those years asleep. Clearly, sleeping is no indulgence. It is essential for replenishing our energies, charging our creativity and readying ourselves for our classes and our colleagues.

Too easily, our necessary seven to nine hours of quality sleep gets whittled down to short and broken attempts. The vital replenishment for our body and brain provided by a restful sleep is integral for you to fend off school stresses. We need an average of eight hours – some of us need a little more, some a little less (indeed, teenagers need a whopping nine hours sleep a night to function effectively at school). No amount of willpower can make up for a lack of sleep when we consistently lose out on it.

So what can you do to battle that Sunday night negative stress and to get the sleep you need? Try these simple strategies:

- Aim for regular sleeping hours, with nightly cues and calming rituals, like a good book before bed etc. If work thoughts invade your attempts to sleep, then make a ritual of completing a list for the next day to soothe your anxieties and to let go.
- Keep your bedroom a technology free zone. Emails receive a definitive no.
- Avoid caffeine four to six hours before sleep.
- Avoid alcohol and high sugar snacks near sleep.
- Cut out napping after six pm.
- Don't toss and turn endlessly. If you are still awake after a twenty-minute span, then get out of bed, undertake a relaxing activity, like reading, then try sleeping again soon after.

Sleep is like depositing money in a bank. The interest on your account builds as you sleep in a good regular pattern, but the converse is sadly true. Given a few nights of poor sleep, you become deeply indebted and your brain can struggle to replenish its precious reserves. Getting into a good sleep pattern, with little rituals to convince your busy brain that sleep is afoot, is crucial.

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4. Use your network

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'A problem shared is a problem halved' is the apple-pie-sweet aphorism. Alas, the opposite is also true. I know many a teacher whose sanctuary is the classroom and whose stresses are to be found squarely at the door of their colleagues. Some teaching colleagues, like every profession, can prove a drain on our emotional resources. Still, having a network of colleagues supporting you will help reduce your negative stress in most cases.

When our colleagues mirror our emotions, our stress levels can actually decrease. Let's put that into context. Preparing to talk in front of the entire school staff when you are a quivering wreck is a fear that plagues many teachers' minds. If you ready yourself accompanied by a seasoned teacher who is wholly assured, then their attempts to becalm you may flounder. Instead, if a colleague were to mirror your fears, by way of similarity, then they provide a helpful buffer for that shot of stress firing your way.ⁱⁱ

Similarity breeds contentment, and helping others is a great way to mitigate your own negative stresses. Having friends and colleagues at school who share our concerns and fears can help stave off some of our more debilitating worries, thereby providing us with the conditions to focus on taking risks and developing our professional practice.

The solutions we seek are most often in our social circle. Love and friendship can help conquer our negative stress. You will have heard of 'fight or flight', but 'tend and befriend' is an equally common response to stress. Everyone knows how a simple hug can make our stresses flood away. If you don't, or you haven't experienced this phenomenon, then you are probably in dire need of a good hug.

You now have the scientific basis to hug your fellow teachers. Use it wisely.

5. Write and reflect

For over three years I have written a blog about teaching and education. Billowed and buffeted by the day job, I wanted a place to record my ideas, unleash my corked rants and think about how I could get a little better and more confident.

The struggle for time, repeated in this book as the lived experience of most teachers, would appear to crush the argument for writing to enhance your confidence. Surely we don't have time or energy for pursuits like writing? Although perceived by most as an extra 'job', it actually made me feel more effective and more efficient. Over time, by forcing myself to reflect and giving me an audience to connect with about my daily practice, I became more confident in what I do.

It is counter-intuitive – surely writing after a long day at school was more work – but it didn't feel like it. That made all the difference. It was, unknowingly at first, a way to reflect and better manage my daily stresses.

This feeling was supported by a Harvard Business School research paper on 'how the 15-minute activity of writing and reflecting at the end of the working day may make you more successful.'ⁱⁱⁱ Paradoxically, the act of regular blogging felt like a time-saver. In another quite startling study, the act of writing about a recent trauma actually saw the trauma wound heal faster.^{iv} Clearly, the psychological impact of writing and reflection can prove a potent boost for us all.

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6. Get a life

Much has been said about the importance of getting a work/life balance; however, I think we need to rethink this divide. Instead of perceiving the tension between our work and our home life, we should instead recognise that teaching is an integral part of our lives (though we should carefully manage its presence in our home).

Of course, our schoolwork should not consume our home lives. Consider our sense of balance if we committed the time and effort to organising our time with our family and friends like we did to completing our essential projects at work. Perhaps we need to take having fun more seriously.

Too many teachers, who are also parents, in aiming to better the lives of their student brethren, forget to tend to their own children. The guilt and anxiety that can build isn't healthy for anyone. It is about the judicious balance of two competing urges and the recognition that you cannot neatly complete every facet of your professional life, but you can better manage it and yourself.

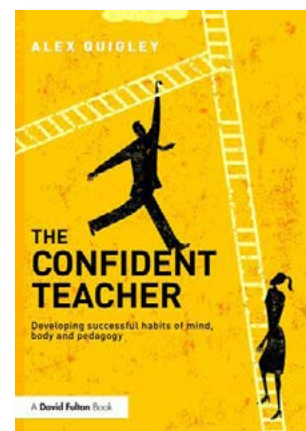
Conclusion: putting it into practice

It is important to note that you should not feel under pressure to undertake all of these ideas all at once. That would prove counterproductive. Instead, we should seek to do one small change well, making it a habit and building from there. These small changes can release some negative stress and accumulate into something powerful that supports your daily work as a teacher.

By undertaking these actions, and by taking care of ourselves and others, we can retain that all-important sense of control over our working lives.

This is an excerpt from *The Confident Teacher* by Alex Quigley. The full book includes further advice on combatting stress, managing student behaviour and more.

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References

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