




A Principal's Guide to Stress Relief

When principals and teachers find ways to alleviate job-related stress, their performance improves.

 **Leadership Compass** » Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007

by Mike Caywood

Principals and teachers face stress every day. We often talk about it, but do we think about what stress really is? Stress can be defined in several ways:

- The body's physiological reaction to any demand;
- A physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in causing disease;
- Anything that stimulates you and increases your level of alertness; or
- The result of how we respond to events.

Whether it is a student discipline problem, a parent problem, or all of the pressure that comes from the No Child Left Behind legislation and the efforts to make adequate yearly progress, stress is a major cause of mental distress and physical illness for educators today. Stress can show up as minor, short-term physical signs such as faster heart beat, rapid breathing, tensed muscles, or "butterflies" in your stomach. These symptoms can be associated with a confrontational phone call from a parent, an unpleasant conversation with a colleague, or a call from the superintendent. Exposure to stressors over a longer period of time can result in more serious symptoms such as digestive problems, change in appetite, frequent colds or other illnesses, headaches, or long-term fatigue. Long-term exposure to stress can also result in behavioral issues such as mood swings, reduced effectiveness on the job, absenteeism, and depression.

The current literature provides many suggestions to help principals and teachers reduce stress in their lives. The following suggestions have worked for me in the past:

Find a "pet" project. Embark on a project that relates to your job but is different enough to make it fun and long-lasting. My pet project started more than 15 years ago and it is still going strong. Each May, I take a group of fifth graders from my school to the North Carolina coast for a week-long study of marine ecosystems. I begin the planning process in November after the stress of state testing is over. During the cold, snowy days of winter, I will perform one or two tasks related to the trip, each time thinking about the fun and excitement the students will experience. (It doesn't hurt to think about the warm, sandy beaches either!) Working on the project alleviates stress because I know that the end product will be rewarding.

Do something wildly different for yourself. Only you will know what that wildly different activity will be—a once-a-month massage, pedicure, and manicure; a decision that you are finally going to purchase a season ticket to the local philharmonic or a sporting event; or the decision to submit a proposal to speak at a state or national professional conference. I chose to take an 11-day trip to the Colorado Rockies with several colleagues, backpacking for eight of those days. For a slightly overweight, long past middle-aged, sedentary principal, it was quite a challenge! It was also fantastic! There was team building that could never have happened at home. There were professional bonds created that were not possible during meetings in the district. Now when things get a little difficult, I can look at the beautiful mountain scene that is now the screensaver on my computer and the memories of that adventure flood over me as I relive a little of the trip each day.

Find someone to talk with. It is important to have someone who will listen to you without being critical. Talking to a spouse can be helpful, but many times he or she is dealing with just as many issues as you are. An accountability group is often an appropriate outlet for discussion. Be cautious, however, about revealing too much in discussions with colleagues because they can become a direct conduit to your immediate supervisor, which can create

additional problems.

Take care of yourself. Experts indicate that breakfast is important to having a good day; so don't skip it. Get away from your desk and the office for a few minutes by taking a walk in the hallways and into classrooms. Connecting with the students will help you remember why you are a principal. If possible, leave the building for a few minutes for a quick walk outside or even a quick trip to grab a cup of coffee. Take mini-sabbaticals by attending workshops and conferences. Participating in state and national principal's conferences is a rewarding experience because you can update your skills while interacting with other principals who are experiencing many of the same things that you are.

Take a reality check. All things considered, some of the situations that we experience are not as big as they seem. Having been through the scare of breast cancer with my wife and almost losing a teenage daughter to a serious illness, I have found that angry parents, insolent students, and difficult situations just do not rise to a level that will frustrate me.

Reducing your stress level is extremely important; but it is just as important that your faculty and staff reduce their stress levels. Some suggestions for reducing staff stress are:

Make sure that your staff enjoy coming to school. Create a welcoming climate by making sure that your building is clean. Almost everyone loves chocolate, so provide it in a candy dish in the staff office. Make a habit of giving gifts. At staff meetings I give away a few small items like markers, notepads, and cups. Many of these items can be secured as samples from fundraiser company representatives. Also celebrate the birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings of your staff.

Support your staff. Support staff when there are conflicts with parents and do not allow parents to berate teachers. Listen to your staff when they are talking to you. Sometimes this means that you will need to stop working on a project or stop reading your e-mail. Provide the supplies and materials they need to be good teachers to the best of your ability and as budgets allow. Expect staff to do their best but allow them to make mistakes.

Read a good book and implement new ideas. *How Full Is Your Bucket?* shares some great ideas on encouraging staff members through fun activities. *FISH!* is a book that shows you how to have fun at work and still get the job done.

Remember that your attitude, the way you react to the events in your life, will have a tremendous impact on your stress level. As you are able to deal more successfully with the stress in your life, you will find that it is much easier to face each new situation. You will be able to spend more time working with students and staff in a more productive manner. When staff members learn to handle their stress, teachers will do a better job of teaching, secretaries will be better ambassadors for your school, and support staff will be more productive in their respective jobs.

References

Lundin, S., Paul, H., & Christensen, J. (2000). *FISH!* New York: Hyperion.

Rath, T., & Clifton, D. *How Full is Your Bucket?* (2004). New York: Gallup Press.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussions about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are the physical and emotional ways that stress manifests itself?
2. How does staff stress impact the teaching and learning going on in our school?
3. How does perceived criticism influence who we feel that we can talk to about our problems?
4. How can we collectively make our school a pleasant place to work?
5. How can the principal lead in stress management?