

A Survival Guide for Frazzled Principals

Principals work in a 24-hour culture of stress that they need to recognize and control.

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IN BRIEF

As many as 75 percent of principals experience stress-related symptoms that can affect their physical, emotional, and mental health. The authors provide practical suggestions for controlling stress, including balancing personal and professional priorities, avoiding three major "time bandits," learning to manage time, and exercising.

The principal today is finding school leadership more than a compendium of administrative skills. Faced constantly with insufficient time to address multiple priorities, principals work in a culture of stress that, combined with growing or constant anxiety, has produced the phenomenon known as principal burnout. This can be defined as a state of complete physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from an inability to cope effectively over an extended period of time with the daily, unresolved

stressors associated with school leadership. As many as 75 percent of principals experience stress-related symptoms that include fatigue, weakness, lack of energy, irritability, heartburn, headache, trouble sleeping, sexual dysfunction, and depression.

So what is a frazzled principal to do about stress? There is no magic bullet. You need to understand that you will always be working in a culture of stress and, therefore, you need to develop a plan to control the impact stress has on your physical, emotional, and mental health. Following these suggestions can help.

Balance and Manage Your Priorities

If you are like most principals, you are constantly thinking about test results, problem teachers, or irate parents. Lack of time, high levels of stress, and juggling too many professional priorities can cause you to neglect important personal needs. But if you choose

to balance your priorities, you can gain more time to do the things you want to do and lower your stress level in the process.

Manage priorities to give yourself more personal time to do things that you want and need to do. Be specific about your needs and realistic in



setting your goals. Write down all goals, both short-term and long-term. Revisit your goals often for fine-tuning and set a time frame for achieving them.

Beware of the "Time Bandits"

In schools, and in life generally, the three major time management problems are *perfectionism*, *procrastination*, and *inability to say "no."* These time bandits can cost you many stressful hours.

Perfectionism basically is the desire

to do something in an ideal manner, requiring a commitment to spending as much time as it takes to reach a goal. The perfectionist is never completely satisfied with the end product and may rewrite a report over and over.

One way to deal with perfectionism is to do frequent reality checks. For example, when faced with a task such as writing up a report for the superintendent, check with other principals and compare your concept of the task

with theirs. If your expectations are significantly out of line, you may need to realign your perception of the task and resist the urge to "not let go."

Procrastination is a specific time bandit that encourages you to put off

Physical Activities that Reduce Stress

Walking is the best exercise from a convenience standpoint. Finding 10 minutes to walk around the gym or playground during a duty-free lunch period is an excellent way to calm down and refocus. While walking at your normal pace, breathe in deeply through your nose and out through your mouth. Put a time limit on how long you will sit and work before you get up and walk around your office, the school halls, or your home. Consider wearing a pedometer in school. It will remind you to walk more to achieve an ideal goal of 10,000 steps a day.

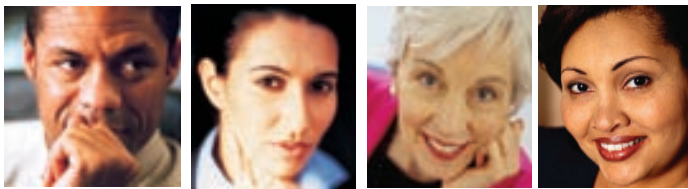
Stretching. Five minutes of moderate stretching can be immediately relaxing. One easy position is to stand straight with feet together, raise your arms as high as you can while inhaling, and hold for a count of three before exhaling as you lower your arms. Do this slowly and carefully three or four times.

If you have a large towel or a mat, you can do a sit-and-stretch. Sit with your feet close together in a comfortable position, inhale deeply and bend forward, with your hands stretching to reach your knees or shins. Slowly exhale as you lower your upper body. Repeat three or four times.

Other physical activities that can help reduce stress include:

- Jogging
- Swimming or walking in a pool
- Water Aerobics
- Weights or Resistance Training
- Bicycling
- Dancing
- Yoga or Pilates
- Desktop Yoga

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a task, meeting, assignment, or lesson until a later time. Procrastinators usually take on too many tasks and many are perfectionists as well. Sometimes the procrastinator just does not want to do the task, which also involves an inability to say “no.”

However, most principals who are procrastinators simply feel overwhelmed by the task at hand and work around it, secretly hoping it will just go away. The tasks that are most often put off to the last minute are the big items. You may seriously plan to do a major task, but decide to complete smaller tasks first. The procrastinator’s greatest enemy is unexpected events.

The third and perhaps the most difficult time robber is the inability to say “no”—or to say it and really mean it. You may feel that if you say “no,” you will be perceived as uncaring.

Usually there are three types of reactions that emerge from an inability to say “no.” The first is that you really don’t want to do what is being asked of you, but you don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. As a result, you may find yourself giving up valuable time and increasing your stress. The second reaction is to procrastinate finishing the task, completing it at the last minute under increased stress. The third reaction is accepting the task and then trying to find someone else during the 11th hour to assist you in getting it done, using people’s good will to get you out of a mess.

Manage Your Time

We strongly recommend that you keep all of your activities (professional and personal) in one calendar, either electronically or with a conventional notebook. Mark in personal and/or family time first, including vacations and holidays. Then you should go through your calendar on a weekly basis and mark periods of time for your personal and/or family time as major priorities. Clear at least 30 minutes per day just for you and 30 minutes for family. Eventually, you will find yourself marking an hour for your personal time and even more time for your family.

You might want to try the ABC Method. To use this approach, plan the week ahead by marking three columns on your calendar. Label the first “High Priority and Urgent,” the second “High Priority and Important,” and the third “Important and Not Urgent.” Make a list of all the tasks that have to be done during the next week and then place each item into one of the three

columns. The goal here is to complete as many of the lesser tasks as possible before they become urgent.

Exercise!

There are numerous ways to deal with stress and we have focused here on physical activities recognized by health professionals as stress reducers when used appropriately and regularly (see

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box). Exercises ranging from a simple walk around the school to running several miles can help to lower blood pressure, make your heart more efficient, increase endurance, improve mood, decrease appetite, increase metabolism, and reduce excessive stress hormones. As your body becomes more resilient, stress is more easily managed.

Eat the Right Foods

If you are overweight or obese, get professional help and change your eating patterns and lifestyle. Do not just diet. Here are some basic ground rules:

Decrease meal portions and make healthier food choices. Add more fresh, frozen, or even canned vegetables and fruit to your diet.

Avoid the "I'm starving" syndrome by not going too long between meals. Three meals a day provide your body with the fuel it needs to get you through the day. If the foods you choose are balanced between low-fat protein, veg-

etables, and starch, you can burn what you eat and store only what your body needs. Skipping meals is like burning the wrong gasoline in your engine: you will not operate efficiently and you may build up body fat.

Stop nibbling at work or between meals. Nibbling is often a reaction to stress. If stress is the cause, you must learn to recognize it and have the resolve to stop nibbling. When you nibble, you can be forcing your body to consume calories that should have been consumed earlier because you skipped a meal. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

The Library of Congress provides the table of contents for *The Frazzled Principal's Wellness Plan: Reclaiming Time, Managing Stress, and Creating a Healthy Lifestyle* by J. Allen Queen and Patsy S. Queen. www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0420/2004015948.html

Prevention magazine's Web site offers a selection of practical articles on dieting, health, fitness, and wellness. www.prevention.com

"Desktop Yoga: A Stress Suppressant" by J. Allen Queen describes and illustrates several simple yoga exercises that principals can use in the privacy of their offices. The complete article can be downloaded by NAESP members. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1179

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A PRINCIPAL'S DAY

“Flexibility Is the Name of the Game”

During my nine years as an elementary school principal, I have found the typical day to be anything but typical. I come to school each morning armed with a well-defined list of tasks to accomplish, fully realizing that one event may totally reshape my focus for the day. Flexibility is the name of the game.

This day begins at 4:30 a.m., and the first hour is spent getting myself ready for school and my two Shelties ready for their day at home. Midway through my 23-minute drive to work, I stop for breakfast at a mom-and-pop restaurant that serves some of the best homemade biscuits I have ever eaten.

After arriving at 6:30, unlocking the outside entrances, and turning on a few lights, I check my e-mail and organize the papers in today's tickler file before the students arrive.

I first visit the cafeteria, where our very active breakfast program is in full swing. One of the teachers handling breakfast duty this week is an aspiring principal, and we discuss some questions she has about school administration.

The morning intercom announcements give me an opportunity to celebrate the good that needs to be recognized and share stories that can motivate kids. This month is Youth Art Month, when we display in our foyer works of art created by local people. I point out that today's painting is the work of our custodian. After reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, our entire student body sings “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which we have been doing every morning during Music in Our Schools Month.

The morning proves surprisingly free of interruptions and I am able to move forward about a dozen projects. I call to my office one student who has been extremely lax in getting his work done. My brief talk concludes

with a stern statement that I will be checking with his teacher to see if there are any more problems.

Just when I am sure this day will be a quiet one, I learn that a first-grade class has just been taken over by a swarm of termites! Who would have known that my “typical day” would include a frantic call to our pest control provider?

I accompany a student group to a performance of “America, We the People” at a downtown theater.

When I arrive back at school, I am greeted with a message that Honda Manufacturing of Alabama is donating \$1,500 toward our Young Author's Day project. This unexpected good news makes up for the termites!

My afternoon calendar includes viewing a “Webinar” on using data. As I view the presentation, I sign a batch of checks and handle other paperwork. Afterward, I take a call from a parent who is heading up a project to allow school supporters to purchase engraved bricks that will replace a portion of the sidewalk leading to the school entrance.

The workday ends at 5 and tonight my wife and I enjoy a meal at the local Mexican restaurant. Tomorrow, another aspiring principal will be interviewing me for an administrative class project, so I make notes to prepare for that interview while watching television with my Shelties.

This day was a good one. To be honest, most of them are because our school has some of the best kids, best teachers, and best parents you will find anywhere.



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Graham Elementary School is a rural school serving 312 students in grades K–6. It is a Title I school with 60 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.