

Saying No to Stress

Building teachers' coping skills has a direct effect on student outcomes

By Keith C. Herman and Wendy M. Reinke

Teaching and educational administration are stressful professions. Although this has always been true, the stress experienced by school professionals seems to increase continuously, fueled in part by the growing expectations of a demanding society. Chronic stress often leads to burnout, and it contributes to attrition among early career educators. Finding ways to improve teachers' coping skills is critical to supporting a healthy school environment and improving student outcomes.

Sorting Out Stress

In a recent study, we sorted teachers into four self-reported categories of stress and coping. The most adaptive pattern, characterized by low stress, occurred among only 7 percent of teachers. The remaining teachers fell into three groups marked by elevated levels of stress and how well they coped with stress, from not well to very well.

To see whether self-reported stress and coping patterns could be observed in student interactions and related to student outcomes, we conducted direct observations in classrooms and administered standardized achievement tests to students. The findings confirmed our twin hypotheses: The group of teachers who had high stress and low coping skills had classrooms characterized by high rates of reprimands and student disruptions, and students in these classrooms had significantly lower performance on math and reading tests.

Tools for Coping

The good news is that we have simple tools to help teachers and other



educational professionals improve their coping skills. Research shows that we can teach people effective ways to manage the stress in their lives and to make measurable improvements to their health, happiness, and behavior. We recently wrote *Stress Management for Teachers: A Proactive Guide* to apply this body of research, the Teacher Coping Model (TCM), to educators.

For use by teachers and principals alike, the TCM is based on a simple premise best summarized by a quote attributed to the Greek philosopher Epictetus that translates roughly to, “People are not troubled by events,

but rather by the view they take of them.” Reflect on this for a moment: Events, in and of themselves, do not cause our emotional lives. To illustrate this point, consider the following hypothetical scenario:

Dr. Hillbrook of East Elementary School wanted to improve communication between home and school, as well as the relationships in her building. At the start of the year, she established the expectation that all teachers would attempt to arrange home visits with parents of students in their classroom. As you might expect, the expectation was met with a range of reactions from



Disable the Emotional Autopilot

Thoughts and feelings can often seem so automatic that many teachers believe they can't be controlled. To get out of the "auto-pilot" mentality, teachers must spend time building awareness of their own thoughts and feelings. Here's how:

- **Keep a self-monitoring log on the nightstand.**
- **Rate feelings on a scale of 1–10 each day (relaxed to stressed, happy to sad, and/or angry to calm).**
- **Write down thoughts or behaviors that go along with that rating.**

After a few days, teachers will be more mindful of their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, setting the stage for them to intentionally adapt their reactions to stressful situations.

teachers; some were angry or overwhelmed, while others experienced a sense of pride and excitement.

All teachers experienced the same event—the announcement of a new expectation for engaging in home visits. Yet they each experienced very different emotional reactions, ranging from very negative to very positive. So if it is not the event, what causes different emotional reactions? It is our perception of, or thoughts about, the event that leads to our emotions.


Influencing the Outcome

The TCM takes advantage of this simple fact to empower teachers

to take control of their emotional lives. The teachers in Dr. Hillbrook's school had no control over the new home visit expectation, but they had immense control over how they perceived the expectation and responded to it.

An important tenet of the TCM is that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interconnected; if we change any one of these domains, the others can't help but change. We don't have direct control over our emotions; there is no "switch" we can use to feel happy or sad or angry instantly. But we do have great influence over how we feel through the other two

domains: what we think and perceive, and how we act and behave.

The TCM focuses on training teachers to develop more adaptive thinking habits and behaviors that lead to the types of emotions they would prefer to have. 

Keith C. Herman and **Wendy M. Reinke** are professors at the University of Missouri College of Education.