

MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

TAKING A STAND

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CURRENT

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California Teachers Association

To preserve your health, pick you battles carefully

When asked what the biggest health hazard of the profession is, teachers give this answer more often than not: STRESS.

"We're right up there with air traffic control officers," says Susan Stewart, an English teacher at Redondo Beach High School. "The symptoms are physical and they are major - insomnia, anxiety, etc. There is a lot of stress, and it has escalated since I first started teaching 29 years ago."

Stewart, a member of the Redondo Beach Teachers Association, says the reasons are plentiful: pressure from administrators to increase test scores, pressure from parents to provide an extra boost for their children and pressure created by student behavior problems.

"Teachers are leaving the profession in droves because of stress," says CTA President Wayne Johnson. "They choose, ultimately, not to endure the stress of tests driving curriculum and having to teach under horrible conditions in old buildings with leaky roofs and broken windows."

"A few years ago I had an anxiety attack - mainly from pressures from the administration," says one Central Valley teacher from a low-performing school who wishes to remain anonymous. "I'm now on medication. A lot of teachers I've spoken to are on medication. Stress can be debilitating."



After students leave for the day, math teacher Gaylen Clark takes time for herself on the Santa Maria High School track.

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The teacher attributes most of her stress to the pressure of being on a very tight schedule. "It's all planned down to the minute," she says.

"Everything has to be done at a certain time. It has made me a workaholic to keep on top of things. I stay late and take work home with me all the time."

In addition to mental strain, stress can manifest itself in physical form. "I bottle it all up inside my stomach, back and shoulders, which results in aches and pains. And I catch everything because my immune response is low," says Carol J. Mathews, a member of the Manhattan Beach Unified Teachers Association.

A drama teacher at Manhattan Beach High School, Mathews says putting on productions is especially stressful - even though the show always goes on.

"The drama teacher gets to hear all the problems; there is always drama in the drama room," she relates. "Something always happens before a show. One of my leads ran away from home the week before the show. I've had a student pulled out of my play for smoking marijuana and another taken out for bad grades. Something always happens."

There is also the stress of not being able to say no, says Mathews. She is vice president of her association, co-chair of her UniServ, a State Council member, and the school's art department chair. And she is in charge of selling enough cookie dough to raise \$40,000 to finance a production of *Sweet Charity*.

"I'm doing way too much. I can't be productive and give 100 percent when I'm involved in so many things and spread so thinly," she laments. "I have no personal life."

There's a different stress that comes from working in an affluent school district, Mathews observes. "There is this thing called 'teacher shopping.' Some parents, from the time their child is in elementary school, start planning on which teachers their child should have at every grade level. They know which teachers get high AP scores so their child can get

teachers get high AP scores so their child can get into the best colleges. These parents apply a lot of pressure."

Teachers in rural areas deal with the stress of transportation problems in stormy weather conditions. "I drive 52 miles to teach in the foothills of Northeastern California," says Patti Lenahan, who lives in Redding and teaches at Indian Springs Elementary School in the town of Big Bend. "In good weather the drive takes one hour. But when winter arrives, the drive is often longer, in spite of my having studded snow tires on my vehicle from November to April. One trip out took two hours due to a heavy snowstorm."

Rural teachers share many of the same problems as inner-city teachers because a high percentage of students are living in poverty. They have the added problems of wearing many different hats in schools staffed by very few teachers, teaching multi-grade classes (Lenahan teaches K-3) and worrying about school consolidation and layoffs due to declining enrollment.

"My class size is small; I have just 10 kids," says Steve Nielsen, who teaches grades 3-5 at Indian Springs Elementary. "But if enrollment declines much further, there will be a decline in teachers. Other schools in the general area have lost teachers. You hear about California needing thousands of teachers, but in Northern California 200 to 300 people apply for every teaching position available. Worrying about teacher cutbacks is a stressor for me."

To deal with the stress of long-distance commuting, Lenahan and Nielsen carpool together. During this time they discuss the problems of the day. "This has enabled us to blow off a lot of steam before we get home," says Nielsen. "It's a nice way to unwind."

The affects of stress can sometimes be fatal, says Ernest Tuttle, a CTA Group Legal Services attorney who represents teachers in the Fresno area. "I've seen teachers become so upset over assignments that they had heart attacks shortly thereafter. It's amazing what stress can do to some people. It can affect their personalities and their physical health, and cause family and employment problems, which

and cause family and employment problems, which compound their stress. Most teachers don't believe they are entering a high-stress profession, and find that it's extremely stressful."

Tuttle recently discussed teacher-related stress at a conference on "Individual Health for Collective Power" held in Visalia, sponsored by the Kings-Tulare UniServ Unit and Tulare-Kings Service Center Council. He offered teachers some sanguine advice to avoid becoming stress statistics.

"Maintain a balance. I've had teachers who work 36 hours a day, seven days a week, with no personal life outside of the classroom. It's important to make time for yourself. Do something you enjoy. Find something outside the classroom and pursue it. You'll be a better teacher because of it."

The attorney also encourages teachers to "pick their battles" in order to preserve their health. "I knew some teachers who were real fighters; they fought every issue to the death. It didn't matter what the issue was. They were right most of the time, filed grievances and lawsuits, and were constantly antagonistic to the administration. But it absolutely ruined their health. Now, with the teacher shortage, teachers have more options. Some things are worth fighting for - and other things might be worth moving to another district over."

Jim Schlotz, a specialist with CTA's Negotiations and Organizational Development Department who also spoke at the Visalia event, points out that stress is aggravated by feelings of powerlessness. "Teachers should either work to get power to gain control over things causing them stress, or let it go," he says. "When you have power, or control, it will lower your stress level."

Teachers can get power through bargaining, says Schlotz. "To achieve power this way, it helps to have clear, focused bargaining goals. Strike a balance between what is just and what is achievable. There are a lot of causes we can fight, but we should temper that with what is winnable."

It helps to recognize stress symptoms and try to gain control over them early on, says Dr. Jackie Harris-Groeber, Ph.D., a licensed clinical

Harris-Groeber, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist who was also on the Visalia panel. "You might have headaches, stomachaches or muscle tension. You might have trouble concentrating. Or you might experience 'avoidance' and feel like you don't want to go to work because you are feeling overwhelmed."

When stress builds, says Harris-Groeber, the body goes into 'emergency mode' and sends adrenalin to the extremities - away from the brain - resulting in 'fight or flight' sensation that may trigger panic or the desire to flee.

"When you recognize the symptoms, stop right there in the classroom and take slow, deep breaths that will signal to the body that it is not an emergency, or that the emergency has passed. That's the beauty of breathing; we can do it anywhere."

"What we put inside our bodies can contribute to stress," she adds. "Teachers who are fatigued by stress may drink a lot of coffee, which contributes to stress and fatigue. If you can decrease caffeine and increase protein, so your body isn't running on high rev, it's likely to bring your stress level down."

Ask yourself what triggers your stress, perhaps by keeping a journal, she suggests. By analyzing stress, you can learn to control how your coping mechanisms kick in. Some situations may trip "triggers" from previous events, causing overreaction or inappropriate reactions.

"For example, if you grew up in a home where chaos occurred when Dad got drunk, and it began with hearing loud anger, then having a loud and angry child in the classroom may trigger fear and anxiety in you. A trigger from the past causes a reaction that is out of proportion to what is happening in the classroom."

Teachers might be able to control triggers from the past if they are consciously aware of them, or might find it helpful to work with a therapist.

"I was raised by schoolteachers, so they are close to my heart," says Harris-Groeber. "I also treat many teachers who may be experiencing burnout or unhappiness due to high stress levels. I always

or unhappiness due to high stress levels. I always try to encourage teachers to choose optimism. By saying, 'How can I make this better?' instead of 'Isn't this terrible?' you are more likely to prevent stress."

"Teachers can be stress carriers in a classroom," says Harris-Groeber. "If a teacher is stressed, kids experience a higher level of stress, too. If a teacher can slow things down, it will help students feel less stressed and more able to learn."

Some tips for handling stress, from the book *CareWise Guide: Self-Care from Head to Toe* which the CTA Economic Benefits Trust is making available free to CTA members, include:

- Exercise regularly, at least 30 minutes a day.
- Eat nutritious meals and try to get enough sleep.
- Don't be a workaholic. Develop hobbies and outside interests.
- Try yoga relaxation, meditation and other muscle-relaxation techniques.
- Keep things in perspective. For example, will this stress-inducing event be memorable years from now?
- Look for creative solutions, such as carpooling, team teaching or having home chores taken over by others.
- Strengthen relationships with supportive friends and family members.
- Learn to say "No" in a friendly manner.
- Seek help, especially if you are severely depressed or thinking about suicide.

Many school districts offer employee assistance plans that include psychological counseling. Such wellness programs may also offer classes in nutrition, exercise, debt counseling and other areas that can lead to a healthier, less stressed lifestyle both at home and in the classroom.