

Stressed Out

It's the daily cry of almost everybody who works, but researchers say educators are sounding off in record numbers--and for good reason. The big question: What to do?

By Sheree Crute



Linda Flournoy seldom missed a day of school. Juggling five classes of nearly 130 students a day at Eastside Union High in San Jose, California, she saw stress as part of the drill. "I was always a warrior," says Flournoy, a teaching veteran of more than 20 years. "The work was always really stressful"--particularly, she said, because of "the load of paperwork."

But Flournoy kept at it, day in and day out, and her take-no-prisoners approach to handling the pressure--getting by on savvy advice from professional journals and the thrill of helping students--worked like a charm. That is, until she developed hypertension and a raft of other health problems at the age of 43.

"I knew it was time for a change," says the wife and mom of two sons. So five years ago Flournoy moved to nearby Accell Middle College, an alternative public high school where she teaches 50 kids a day. It's not that life has changed dramatically, she says, but she's managing better and taking better care.

Flournoy is just one of thousands of educators who grapple every day with the frustrating question of how to handle this most baffling--but constant--of professional hazards: stress. A recent survey by **Optum Research**, a Minnesota-based company that studies work-related health risks, found that 88 percent of teachers experience moderate to high levels of stress--and this research is only the most recent in a small avalanche of work on the topic.

Why all this interest in educators, given the pervasive nature of stress throughout our culture? Because, researchers say, educators face unique circumstances. The often overpowering combination of overcrowded classrooms, testing pressures,

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paperwork, and anxious parents, not to mention often rambunctious and stressed-out kids, has put teachers at particularly high risk. And teachers tend not to know when--or how--to stop and refuel.

"Teachers are troopers," says Mark Attridge, Ph.D., principal research analyst at Optum, "but they're wearing themselves down." Unlike people in many other professions, he says, they appear "more committed to facing stress" day after day.

Committed, but at what cost? Stress, Attridge says, can make large workloads even tougher to manage, interfere with our personal and social relationships, and as NEA's own data bear out, ultimately send educators hitting the exit door. One-third of new teachers leave the profession after the first five years--in no small part because of the stressful challenges. And as Flournoy discovered, when you "bear up" without positive lifestyle fixes, the long-term loss can be your health.

A Litany of Ills

Still, homing in on the health effects of workplace stress is a little like tracking a chameleon. The warning signs masquerade as familiar things, taking on the appearance of seemingly unrelated ills. "We've documented at least 50 common symptoms of stress," says Paul J. Rosch, M.D., president of the American Institute of Stress. Headaches, back pain, frequent colds, heartburn, anger, depression, overeating or undereating, and insomnia--all are just a few of the signs that surface before full-blown illnesses like heart disease and hypertension develop.

The source of this bad news: the flood of adrenaline and hormones, specifically cortisol, which rush through your body when you feel stressed, temporarily halting normal functions. Unfortunately, almost every organ in our bodies gets in on the act--heart, liver, kidney, lungs. Stress can even damage the brain, attacking memory and cognitive skills, according to Guy McKhann, M.D., and Marilyn Albert, Ph.D., in their book, *Keep Your Brain Young* (Wiley, 2002).

So can you avoid stress? Sorry, no. But you can manage it. "The most important thing to learn about stress," says Rosch, "is that it's often not the external events that are stressful, but how you perceive them." And perception is entirely under your control."

Getting a Handle

Making changes is actually not as hard as it may seem. "Figure out what's ticking you off," Rosch says. "Conduct a stress audit." Sit down with paper and pencil and make note of situations that fray your nerves. Be aware that stress is different for each of us, and that there's good stress (called eustress)--the sort of adrenaline rush that spurs you on to great achievements--and bad stress--the kind of daily burden that drains you of energy and drive. Make good use of the first kind and learn to eliminate or manage your response to the second.

"Don't waste time on what you can't control," says Rosch, "but look openly at everything"--your commute, your lunch hour, your reactions. Once you uncover your most likely stressors, you can adopt solutions that bring greater peace.

Clear the Decks

Nothing cuts stress like banishing confusion from your life. Getting organized can work miracles if you're working with hundreds of kids each day.

"The average person spends six weeks a year just looking for things," says Shawn Kershaw, a former elementary school teacher who is now a professional organizer in Chalfont, Pennsylvania. Just writing things down--you can only recall seven things at a time--can produce great results. A quick guide:

At Work:

Create systems. To track assignments and tests, list student names on a log and track work as "on time," "a day late," etc. If you move from one part of the school to another, organize to-do lists, student papers, or your on-the-job supplies in lightweight, portable file boxes or containers. Move your "work station" from home to office, cafeteria, nurse's station, or classroom.

Create two sets of "day of the week" hanging files using two colors--one for this week, one for next. Store completed work on the day it needs to be returned to your colleagues or students.

Get centered. Set up classrooms on the kindergarten model of "centers." Store children's supplies and teaching materials by topic (reading), season (the holidays), and function (recess).

Upgrade your technology. Purchase or download free software to input and track grades.

Take five. At the end of the day, consider the next day's to-do list and be prepared.

At Home:

Coordinate your crew. Fill in the family's calendar every Sunday night. Post a copy on the refrigerator and keep it with you in your planner. Record where each person will be and when, including parents. Don't forget childcare pick up and drop off schedules.

Fill 'er up. Never come home with your tank on empty.

Live by the list. Note regular after-work errands and keep the list with you.

Meal plan. Figure out a week's worth of dinners ahead of time and shop once a week.

Box 'em in. Create a homework box for each child containing paper, scissors, glue, pens, pencils, markers, and crayons.

Cool down. Plan some down time every night, even if it's just 10 minutes.

Cultivate Calm

Don't know how? Try these stress-reduction tips from Mark Attridge from Optum Research, Paul J. Rosch, M.D., president of the American Institute of Stress, and Jeff Goelitz from the Institute of HeartMath.

1. **Walk it off.** Run, bike, or hike, just move. And, eat light and right. It will soothe your nerves and reduce stress-related health risks. (Visit www.neahin.org/challenge to learn more about reducing stress through fitness and nutrition.)
2. **Choose** rhythm and blues over road rage. Remember, a lot of stress is in the eye of the beholder, so take 10 deep breaths, listen to music, and decide not to get angry or anxious about everyday aggravations.
3. **Run your own show.** Learn to say "no" to obligations that may be stressful and time consuming.
4. **Manage up.** Administrators and supervisors should be constructively informed about problems at work and asked to provide solutions. If you're being treated unfairly, calmly make your case until you get results. Remember, you deserve a better situation.
5. **Talk it out.** Teacher support groups work. Discuss problems with colleagues and help each other find solutions.
6. **Use your emotions.** Use positive feelings to offset negative feelings. Take an "appreciation break." Capture a sincere feeling of appreciation for your spouse, favorite outdoor haven, or a dear friend, and hold onto that feeling while breathing deep into your heart (the center of your chest.) Continue deep breathing for one or two minutes while concentrating on those warm thoughts. Do the exercise anytime and, research shows, you'll balance your heart rhythm and build up your emotional strength and resistance to stress.

For Women Only

Women should be especially alert to the overwhelming stress of wearing three hats--mom (or caregiver), wife, and professional. Several studies have shown that women not only work hard on the job, **they often work harder at home**, and have prolonged stress responses to negative relationships and higher levels of stress due to motherhood.

So psychologist Shelley Taylor urges stressed out women to use their secret weapon. "Several different hormones are produced in women in response to stress," says Taylor, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *The Tending Instinct* (Holt, 2002). According to her work, oxytocin, boosted by estrogen, encourages women to tend to their and others' needs and seek out support from good friends in times of strain. Giving into that instinct may be a woman's best defense. So nurture a neglected body, mind, or spirit. And never neglect girlfriends, Taylor says. Reaching out is an important part of managing stress.

Also web sites:

<http://www.stress.org/>

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html>