

Teachers fight – or flight

Stress is a well known phenomenon nowadays appearing in many different contexts. It is widely accepted in the literature that stress is caused by a combination of external and internal factors. An internal stressor which many of us in education may recognise is a tendency towards perfectionism. This trait for example, can cause stress especially when there are too many competing demands. To cope we stay at work longer, arrive earlier and bring work home. We become consumed more and more by the work we do and, unfortunately, our relationships suffer.

That's the thing with teaching; it overlaps and spills into many areas of our lives. Our job is not clearly defined with neat boundaries. We need energy and stamina as we tend to individuals, the class as a whole and to our added responsibilities both inside and outside of school. It is not surprising then that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions report high levels of stress amongst teachers (88%).

Added to this are the countless number of external stressors, like the loss of take home pay, changes in maternity, paternity and sick leave, an increase in student aggression and drive by inspections; to name but a few. We are well aware that the ever increasing paper work, class sizes and a continuing reduction of budgets for much needed resources are affecting our students and this too breaks our hearts.

These are the factual challenges we as teachers and principals face and it is worth noting that we are doing a good job, often going beyond the call of duty because we take the business of teaching, learning and caring seriously.

The impact of stress on our health and wellbeing

We could say that our identity as a

teacher once formed takes on a life of its own. We strive to do better, to be better by working just as hard or harder than



when we first embarked on a teaching career. We do not take the foot of the pedal as we continually upskill but beware; we are also on the road to exhaustion, compassion fatigue and burn-out.

Like it or not we too are only human and can be affected by stress and stress related illnesses. Over time, this can lead to burnout – a major issue for those of us in the education profession. Burnout is like a silent attack that lurks and builds up over time poisoning our whole system leaving us depleted. Looking after our health and wellbeing, along with re-addressing the public perception of teaching as a profession, is certainly an issue.

Fight back

It is vitally important to take control of our physical and mental health.

We can do this in a number of ways. For me mindfulness is the practice which sustains and grounds me. It is called a practice because it requires effort on my part and like any self-care tool it needs to be cultivated, requires discipline and patience. As a result I am more accepting of all aspects of my life. I am conscious of my limitations and am in a better position to know what I need whether I am exercising, teaching or meeting friends. However, mindfulness

will not appeal to everyone so it is important to try a variety of things. Discover what works for you.

Some of the following suggestions may appeal to you. While the list is not exhaustive it is designed to create space from physical tension which, if not recognised early, can build up into an unhealthy permanent tension making rest near impossible and consequently turning tiredness into exhaustion.

- Get physically fit by scheduling regular exercise sessions.
- ✎ Aim to have a healthy diet.
- ✎ Try to get enough sleep.
- ✎ Turn off the computer and the mobile phone earlier than normal. We do not have to be accessible at all times.
- ✎ Savour some time outdoors by scheduling a walk or simply by being aware of moving from the school building into the outdoors at the end of the day.
- ✎ Design a cut off point mentally and physically from school related work and stick to it.
- ✎ Keep some time to relax and recharge during the weekend. We know how to work hard but maybe we do not know how to take a break.
- ✎ Enjoy your holidays and make no apologies to family, friends and those outside the profession.
- ✎ Be kind and supportive to your work colleagues, remembering we can all do something to help create a happier, healthier work environment. I like the following words from the Dalai Lama "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

We teachers are passionately devoted to doing our best in a profession that has almost endless complexities and challenges and yet caring for ourselves is something which rarely surfaces as a theme.

Learning to combat stress with mindfulness

If you would like to develop your own mindfulness practice you may be interested in the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Course for Educators scheduled to take place in the INTO Learning Centre. The programme consists of eight weekly classes and a one day retreat. The course is experiential, supportive and structured. It is designed for educators only so you can feel free to work in parallel with colleagues. Participating in the

stress reduction programme requires commitment on your part so that you can, learn, practice and integrate mindfulness into your everyday life. The course runs through the spring, with a week off for midterm; beginning Thursday, 29 January with the final session on 26 March, costing €320. The programme commences each Thursday at 4.15p.m. and ends at 6.30p.m., providing a window to process stress after a day's work and

experience some relaxation techniques before heading home.

On completion you will receive a certificate in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction which is an entry requirement should you decide to opt for further training.

For details and registration visit www.intolearning.ie or contact Kay directly through her website www.aframeofmind.org.