Teaching is stressful. Being a school student can be stressful. As teachers we need to care for ourselves (so that we can continue to teach well) and to care for our pupils (so that they continue to learn). Successful stress management in ourselves and our pupils means we must:

- identify the causes of stress
- recognise the symptoms of stress
- develop stress management techniques

In a local study, Dr Esther Tan (1985) found the main sources of stress reported by teachers were:

1. Work
2. Family
3. Personal
4. Environment

The major stresses in teaching come from:

- work overload
- poor motivation in pupils
- pupil indiscipline
- poor working conditions
- time pressures
- conflicts with colleagues

We are all different. What may be a stressor (a source of stress) for another teacher, may not worry you, and vice versa. So we must be able to detect the signs of stress in ourselves, our colleagues and our pupils.
These are common stress symptoms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tension headache</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tiredness</td>
<td>Inability to concentrate</td>
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<td>Aching shoulder/neck</td>
<td>Difficulty in making decisions</td>
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<td>Loss of appetite</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<td>Insomnia</td>
<td>Feeling of not being in control</td>
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<td>Nightmares</td>
<td>Often feeling irritable</td>
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<td>High blood pressure</td>
<td>Often criticizing others over small matters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequent loss of appetite</td>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
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<td>Increased use of drugs, like nicotine, alcohol, and sleeping pills</td>
<td>Overeating</td>
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<td>Upset stomach</td>
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These symptoms may have a number of causes, stress is only one. Which symptoms are your body's reaction to stress will be particular to you, and so you need to be aware of them and on the lookout for them. However, as humans we have evolved bodies which do behave in the same general way to a perceived threat. The father of stress studies, Dr Hans Selye, found three stages in our bodies' response to a perceived stress:

**ALARM REACTION**
- Hormonal changes effect
- heart rate, blood pressure,
- sugar level, etc

**RESISTANCE**
- The body adapts

**EXHAUSTION**
- The finite supply of
- adaptive energy is exhausted
We need to act before the final stage, burnout, is reached. Some teachers retire early because of stress-induced burnout. We must not let this happen to us.

There are four steps in stress management:

- Rehearse and apply coping skills
- Identify your stressors and your reactions
- Resolve to strengthen your coping resources
- Accept you are having stress

**Common Coping Methods**

Just as we all react to a possible stressor differently, so also we cope differently. In research in five local schools, Ms Khoo (1990) found that many factors (such as years of experience, levels taught and gender) influenced the coping strategies adopted. What we have to do is to identify what works for us, and then apply it. The methods described below work for some people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Relaxation</th>
<th>Nutrition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive thinking</td>
<td>Support systems</td>
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**Exercise** helps to relieve tension by using up some of the physical side-effects of stress, such as the increase in blood sugar. Recent research has shown that physically fit women were more able to cope with mental stress and therefore also gained a psychological benefit.

**Relaxation** includes many techniques. Some teachers profit from prayer or meditation. Others use muscle relaxation, stroke a pet dog or cat, or watch funny videos; or do whatever relieves tension for them.
**Nutrition** affects how well we cope with the physical and mental demands of stress. Poor nutrition in itself causes stress. Stress (and exercise) can increase the need for nutrients. We have all heard the tips for good nutrition, such as a balanced diet. We also have to eat regularly, not skip meals during a busy school day. When we do eat, we must not hurry our meal but eat slowly and savour the food.

**Positive thinking** means consciously controlling our perception, so we see the silver lining not the dark cloud. There are few absolute sources of stress: the interaction between a potential source of stress and our own perception, attitudes and sensitivities, determines if a stimulus becomes a stressor. Changing our perception of a stressor can mitigate, even neutralise it. Stress need not be bad, it can bring out the best in us, as long as it does not become too severe. If you are having difficulty managing a class, do not look on it as a problem, but as an opportunity for you to improve your classroom management. Tell yourself that you can control the class, that you have had difficult classes before and you managed then. In local research, Dr Soh (1986) found that teachers who believed in their personal efficacy in influencing student performance and behaviour reported lower degrees of stress. Try to believe that you do make a difference to your pupils.

**A Support Network** is necessary because we all need someone to turn to for advice and a sympathetic ear.

Who are your fellow teachers who listen to you and are concerned about you?

1.  
2.  
3.  

Outside of school, who provides you with a sympathetic ear?

1.  
2.  
3.  
If you can name more than three of each, congratulations!

Cultivating friends and maintaining relationships does not happen automatically. We can become so absorbed in our work that we do not realise we are alone until it is too late; we need help and it is not there. A network is a reciprocal relationship.

List three people for whom you will provide support at work:

1. ______________ 2. ______________ 3. ______________

List three other people outside of work for whom you will provide support:

1. ______________ 2. ______________ 3. ______________

Conclusion

Stress cannot be avoided. Learning to avoid or negate some stressors and to cope with the remaining stress is a gradual process, not a short-lived enthusiasm. How we see ourselves is more important than the "reality" of the situation. We must always keep a positive self-image, believe that we can change for the better and that we do make a difference, not indulge in self-fulfilling negative prophecies. Research has repeatedly shown that people who feel they are powerless to change their lives and have no control over what happens to them are the most stressed and the shortest-lived.

Whenever you attempt a new way of handling stress, whether you succeed or not, do a self-debriefing afterwards. Ask yourself what went well and what went wrong, how you might have handled things differently. Analyse the situation and congratulate yourself for the positive aspects. Look for the optimum level of stress in your life and remember the four steps. To relieve distress you can:

- Modify the stressors, for example, say "No"
- Modify the perceptual factors, work on your self-concept
- Modify your health factors, for example, relaxation and exercise
To give you a follow on activity, keep this log for a week.

**STRESS LOG**

Stress can come from a single incident like a quarrel with another teacher or from an accumulation of less dramatic events.

For one week, at the end of each day, describe:

1. The single most stressful incident that occurred to you.
2. The most stressful series of events that happened to you, such as constant interruptions.
3. Indicate from 1 (not at all stressful) to 10 (extremely stressful) the approximate level of your stress for the day.

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Did any stressful event not happen that usually does happen?
Further Reading


