

Working with  
**colleagues**

Looking after yourself



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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## Looking after yourself

Dealing with the demands of working in a school can be very stressful. There are, however, some things you can do to relieve the stress you face daily at work. Looking after yourself is all about creating a good balance in your life. It involves using some time just for you, to do those things that make you feel good.

Looking after yourself will help you to avoid work fatigue, dissatisfaction and burning out. It will also help you to model positive coping behaviours to your students and colleagues. People who take time out to feel good about themselves and their work tend to be more able to cope with stress and daily challenges.

A balanced lifestyle has a range of components that enhance your health and offer a preventive measure against stress and burnout. There are four major components of a balanced lifestyle. Use the chart below to appraise your lifestyle. Is there one component (or more) that you should spend more time on?

### Four components of a balanced lifestyle

<b>WORK</b> Working and living within a budget Developing your professional self	<b>FAMILY &amp; FRIENDS</b> Spending time with family and friends
<b>PLAY &amp; REST</b> Participating in sport, recreational activities, and hobbies. Relaxation and sleep	<b>CONTRIBUTING TO OTHERS</b> Helping and being involved in something bigger than your own life including school, local, global and online communities



## Strategies to help you look after yourself and relieve stress

On the following pages are some things you can do to relieve stress. Select those that resonate with you or create your own. Regular use of these techniques at least 3–4 times per week is important to prevent burnout and feeling overwhelmed.

- **Develop a self-care card.** Make up a list you can refer to when you're feeling overwhelmed or, alternatively, as a preventive strategy so you don't get stressed. List at least four things you can do that will reduce your stress levels. Make one for home and one for school. It is important to make adaptations as techniques lose their strength or if you find other techniques that work better for you. Use these strategies regularly to prevent daily stressors becoming overwhelming.

**WHEN I GET HOME**

- Practice breathing and relaxing
- Go for a walk in the park (at least 20 minutes)
- Call Mary for a talk
- Go to yoga (at least twice a week)

**AT SCHOOL**

- Focus on breathing for five breaths
- One coffee only
- Stretch arms and legs
- Go for a short walk when class is at specialists or I have a 'free' period
- Talk with Nick, Anna or Lucy
- Squeeze a stress ball

## At school

- **Think about what went well today.** At the end of each day, take a moment to think of at least one thing that went well in your classroom that day. It might be something big, such as your class raising the most amount of money for the school fundraiser, or something small, such as when a student shared a funny story with you. When we are stressed, we tend to over-emphasise the negative things that happen, so thinking about what went well is important. Focusing on positives helps to put the day in perspective.
- **Laugh and share humour.** Use humour with your class or with colleagues. Sixty-second presentations where several students take turns to voluntarily present a short, entertaining oral presentation once a week can add a sense of fun and engagement. Similarly, sharing a short yarn, story or embarrassing moment with colleagues can lighten-up the day and create a sense of fun that helps to create bonds of goodwill between colleagues. It also works as a buffer against the inevitable collegiate disagreements and conflicts.
- **Develop an optimistic mindset.** Positive thinking tends to attract positive people.
- **If you believe you may be suffering from stress, anxiety or depression, see your doctor.** This will rule out any health issues that may be causing you to be feeling stressed, anxious or depressed. If necessary, your doctor will make a referral for you to see a psychologist or other mental health practitioner. Alternatively, some departments of education or central offices have



confidential employee assistance programs where you may be able to access a small number of free sessions with a consulting psychologist.

## Work effectively with colleagues and parents

Infrastructure in schools is often bare or spartan and many teachers are in open learning areas for large parts of the day. Being highly visible means most people will freely approach you if they need to speak with you. If you want to 'protect' your free time, then you need to be clear about when you are and are not available.

- **Set boundaries with parents and colleagues** around when you are and are not available to speak. Tell parents about your preferred methods and most appropriate times for communication. Display this information in a prominent place outside your classroom and send it home to all parents in a letter early in the term. Explain to parents why you are unable to meet with them in the ten minutes before the school bell unless the meeting is pre-arranged or urgent. This time is important in establishing a quiet, calm and safe start to the day and allows students to interact with you if required before the school day begins.
- **Learn to say no.** Recognise your limits and learn to say no when you need to and can. You may not be able to say no to an 'extra' or to a direct instruction from the principal, but there will be other occasions when you will be entitled to do so. See the **Psych4Schools** ebooklet *Negotiation and assertive techniques with parents* for communication tips that might suit you.
- **With colleagues, it may be more appropriate to make an appointment or meeting time** or put the issue on the agenda for the next department or area meeting when it is convenient for both of you to focus on the issue at hand. This avoids a rushed approach to solving problems when you have conflicting work demands.
- **Avoid procrastination traps** such as socializing with other teachers during your planning times.
- **Do as much work (planning, correction, reports) as possible at school rather than taking it home.** If work is to be done at home, take only what can realistically be achieved that night. It is probably better to stay at school for an additional 45 minutes – one hour so that your time at home is free for yourself or your family. Some teachers with younger children need to timetable their week so there are clear times to complete out-of-hours schoolwork. You may be able to organise for your children to spend an hour with grandparents or trusted neighbours or friends once a week so additional time can be devoted to school tasks.
- **Work in a team with others as colleagues.** While we all have our individual preferences for teamwork and collegiality, consider some of the following thoughts.
  - It's okay not to like all teachers you come into contact with. However, be professional and focus on getting the job done. They do not need to be your best friend, but you do need to find ways to work with them.
  - Don't contribute to gossip.
  - Try to accept people as they are and look for their strengths rather than honing in on their weaknesses.
  - Don't use 'passive aggressive' behaviour such as not talking, the 'silent treatment' or unprofessional stares. This behavior is not appropriate in the workplace, contributing little to job control and collegiate support. Teachers encourage students to speak up, so try to practice what you preach. Think through the issue and have your say in a



constructive way. If you feel you're not being listened to, then bring this to the attention of the other person as part of the conversation. Listen to their response and evaluate what they are saying.

- Look at and listen to people when they are speaking and try to be friendly and approachable.
  - Focus on the *problem*, not on the person.
  - Never underestimate the power of a genuine 'thank you' or positive comment about someone's effort or achievements. However, this does not include personal comments about their hair, clothes, jewellery, or make-up.
  - If you say you are going to do something, do it. If you are not going to do it, don't say you will.
  - Stay flexible and work at getting along.
  - Develop a positive, helpful and caring attitude—it's catching!
- **Develop rapport with trusted colleagues who hold positive attitudes.** You will then have people to confide in when things go wrong. Seek help when things become too stressful.
  - **Use effective communication** with active listening to help you feel less threatened, and become more comfortable and action-orientated when dealing with others. See the **Psych4Schools** ebooklet '*Effective and assertive communication with teachers*' as it becomes available on the website.

## Mentoring, coaching and supporting

- **Team up with a photocopy partner.** With little or no direct administrative support available in schools for teachers, teaming up with a buddy can help relieve the burden of photocopying. Try and find a low demand time, rather than a high demand time to photocopy.
- **Seek regular opportunities to share teaching strategies.** Bring class activities, resources and ideas to share at department or staff meetings.
- **With permission, swap classes once a term** to share teaching strengths, understand other levels, refresh teaching perspectives and discourage complacency.
- **Inexperienced teachers should seek supportive, more-experienced mentors** within the school, or through professional associations or subject associations.
- **Request collegiate coaching over a term, semester or whole year.** One teacher at each year level can be released to observe their buddy teacher take a lesson on a weekly basis. The following week, the roles are reversed. This allows teachers to observe and learn from each other. As the teachers become more confident, then cross-level collegial coaching can also be encouraged. This program might operate over and above the normal teacher release time so they won't miss important planning time.
- **Join a subject association and participate in study groups, workshops and professional learning activities.** Networking with others can help by sharing problem solving strategies and/or put problems in perspective.



## Reduce and manage stress

- **Recognise when you are becoming stressed** and do something before it becomes overwhelming. You can do this by doing the following:
  - **Pay attention to the first signs of stress in your body.** This may include feeling tired or experiencing a sore neck or shoulders, headaches, irritability or fatigue. Shouting at students can be one sign of irritability or fatigue.
  - **Notice what triggers your stress.** Identifying the things that typically cause you to feel stressed can help you either to prepare for them in advance (if the trigger is unavoidable) or to decrease the likelihood that the trigger will occur. For example, if student management is an issue for you then seek help, support, and attend professional development around the issue.
  - **Learn techniques to reduce the stress trigger.** There are some situations where it is possible to reduce the occurrence of the trigger to your stress. For example, you may become stressed when you are unprepared for an 'extra' (unexpected additional class) or having a 'split class' with additional students in your room for an extended period. You can reduce this potential stress by planning and preparing for this early each term. This situation is worth planning for because every teacher will be faced with this additional work when they least expect it.
  - **Learn techniques to manage stress and implement them as part of your day.** For example, examine your thinking and beliefs. Are you a 'glass half-empty' or a 'glass half-full' person? Remind yourself of the positive things associated with your work and your life. Keep one or two of these positive thoughts in your mind.
- **Teach your whole class relaxation exercises.** Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or guided visualisation can help to control the physical symptoms of worry, such as rapid, shallow breathing and muscle tension. Encourage students to use these techniques when they feel worried or anxious. Immediately after lunch is a good time to use relaxation techniques in the classroom to help calm the students and yourself and refocus ready for the afternoon's activities. See the **Psych4Schools** website for relaxation activities.
- **Learn how to deal with challenging students, colleagues and parents.** Review the **Psych4Schools** website, make a specific request for support with an issue, and subscribe to the monthly eNews for information about regular new ebooklets and updates.

## Exercise, share interests and play

- **Go for a walk.** Get out of the school at least once a week and go for a short walk at lunchtime, recess or other appropriate time. Leaving the school even for 5–10 minutes will give you space to clear your head, increase your energy and concentration levels, and reduce stress. To increase the effectiveness of the walk, take the time to really notice and savour what is around you. See if you can find something you've never seen before or something that is particularly beautiful or striking—it might be a tree, a crack in a fence, ducks on a creek, a new shop or a big grey cloud.
- **Implement two-minute stretching or activity breaks during lessons.** Simply standing up, taking a deep breath and stretching your arms high above your head can revive your energy levels. You can get your whole class to do this with you. Regular class stretching helps to keep students alert. Alert students are more likely to stay engaged and focused on their work. Schedule regular two-minute breaks throughout your lessons, where both you and your students



can 'chill out', stretch your leg and arm muscles, or gently move your head from left to right and relax for a moment before refocusing on the task at hand.

- **Take a five-minute break at least once a day.** During this time you can do some exercises (even while seated), close your eyes and focus on your breathing, listen to your favourite song, meditate, eat a healthy snack, or call a friend. It doesn't matter what you do, but it must be something that makes you feel relaxed, loved and/or supported. Stick to a regular short time frame and you will find that this is something you can do at least once a day.
- **Implement a staff health opportunity.** For example, school membership at a local gym where staff can share in a reduced membership fee, in-house fitness or yoga sessions, head massage workshops, or a laughter workshop once a semester. Work with local organisations to schedule several short professional learning opportunities each year out of the school that also provides time to talk informally.
- **Create exercise programs and interest groups for students and teachers.** Teaching provides the perfect environment to combine your health, fitness and recreational interests with improving student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers who volunteer additional time to add to the extracurricular activities of the school help build a sense of belonging at the school. These teachers are also generally highly regarded by others.
  - Introduce a 20-minute fitness class or walking group before school.
  - Provide a morning aerobics or stretching class that the whole school, year level or class can participate in for 30 minutes, two mornings each week. One session per week could be for teachers only.
  - Run a 30-minute student program at lunchtime in one of your personal interest areas such as a table tennis, chess club, video games club, knitting club, gardening club, painting club, or puzzles club.

## Eat healthy foods

- **Limit caffeine intake.** Do not drink too much tea, coffee or caffeinated soft drinks if you are feeling stressed. The caffeine can heighten the stress and make it worse. The same applies to sugar and highly processed foods. Regularly drinking water throughout the day, with one cup of coffee in the morning and one cup of tea at lunchtime will be more suitable than regular cups of coffee and caffeinated soft drinks.
- **Implement a regular healthy snack break before morning recess or a 'crunch before lunch'** of cut-up fresh fruit or vegetables. You will have more energy and be more likely to stay on-task during class time if you participate in a regular healthy snack break.
- **In the cooler months introduce a weekly soup-for-lunch day** where several staff members take it in turns to provide a choice of healthy soups. As well as having many health benefits, it also promotes opportunities for staff to socialise over lunch once a week. In summer, salads could replace soup.

## At Home

- **Exercise.** Try to exercise at least four times a week. Choose forms of exercise you enjoy. It might be walking, basketball, running, swimming, aerobics, yoga or something else. Exercise has been shown to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, and to increase



alertness and energy. If you are tired when you get home from work, simply going for a 20-minute walk followed by a healthy snack should noticeably increase your energy levels.

- **Do something nice for yourself.** It's important to take time out to do something comforting or relaxing. Some examples include lying on your back on the floor for five minutes and relaxing by concentrating on areas of tension using deep muscle relaxation techniques (see the **Psych4Schools** website for relaxation activities), play with your children, take a bath, watch a movie, walk the dog, write a letter to a friend, have a massage, read a book, catch up with a good friend, call a family member, draw a picture, write in a journal, cook a delicious meal.
- **Practise deep abdominal breathing and progressive muscle relaxation techniques.** These techniques have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety. The more you practise using them, the more effective they will become. A good place to practise initially is on a comfort flat surface such as the bedroom floor. There are lots of exercises available to buy or download for free on the Internet to assist you.
- **Ensure you get enough sleep.** Adults need at least 7–8 hours of sleep each night. Having a regular bedtime and wake time during the working week and allowing for 10–15 minutes of quiet time in bed before lights off can assist in falling asleep. Quiet time in bed before sleep should be spent talking quietly with your partner or reading a book or magazine.
- **Ensure there is some down time before bed.** Do not go to bed with your mind in overdrive. If you have had a late night at school because of parent–teacher interviews, a long school council or a school board meeting, then it is important to have a warm drink, a short relax and perhaps read a few pages from a novel before attempting to sleep. During downtime, no television, schoolwork, Internet, telephones, or electronic games should be used. It is ideal if all screens can be switched off at least an hour before bed. If something is bothering you, deal with it the next day or give yourself permission to simply 'sleep on it', allowing your subconscious or unconscious mind to deal with the issue while you sleep. If you don't do this, your conscious mind, unable to resolve the issue, will keep you awake for the next few hours.
- **Do not use bedtime as a worry time.** If worry or a specific thought is stopping you from sleeping then consider these ideas:
  - Get up and write down what you are worried about as brief dot points to deal with tomorrow. One or two ideas as possible solutions could also be noted.
  - Turn off your worrying mind by reading a novel to distract your thinking.
  - Focus on a soothing thought or image as a technique for falling asleep.
- **Short discussions the next day can often dispel typical everyday concerns** and help to prevent the development of excessive, escalating or ongoing worry. Talking to someone can help to reframe worries as small issues, and assist problem solving.
- **Use productive coping.** Identify things that help you cope and feel better without harming yourself or others. This is known as productive coping. Productive coping includes, for example, talking to a mentor or friends, solving the problem, working harder, exercising, using humour, walking the dog, seeking advice from a colleague or other professional, learning relaxation techniques, using deep breathing, yoga, and watching television programs that you enjoy.
- **Coping strategies that are non-productive** are approaches that might make you feel better in the short- term but are harmful for mental health and wellbeing in the long term. Examples of non-productive strategies include ignoring the problem, using distractions such as excessive use of video games, mindless late night television, drugs, alcohol, over-eating, violence, yelling.



- **Have at least one to two weeknights where you don't take work home.** A balanced life style requires breaks and time away from work.
- **Consider taking a 'mental health' day.** We are not encouraging 'taking a sickie', but there are times when you may feel you need a day for yourself. Talk to your doctor, principal or other trusted colleague, as there may be an alternative to feeling this way. Almost all principals will be supportive and understanding when a difficult personal or family issue arises and it is important to be able to speak confidentially to them. If you do take a day off, consider taking at least part of the day to do something just for you.

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