



# Recommendations for the Wellbeing of School Educators

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## Recommendations for the Wellbeing of School Educators<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Preamble

The high level of stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion reported by many school teachers across the world today has become a cause of concern amongst teachers and educational authorities alike. Many aspiring young people nowadays are regarding teaching as a high stress profession.

But as Hans Selye, the 'father of stress', rightly said it is not stress that kills us, but how we respond to it. Rather than stress itself, it is the way stress is handled that has the most impact on work, health, wellbeing, and quality of life. Various strategies such as self-efficacy and sense of competence, sense of community and collegiality at work, mentoring, support by administration, provision of adequate resources and opportunities for professional learning, and stress management techniques such as mindfulness and physical exercise, have been found to support teachers in the challenges of their profession and turn such challenges into opportunities for growth and development.

These recommendations are based on the video pack **Teachers in Control: Managing the Stress of the Profession (2020)** which describes how teachers from different parts of the world manage the stress in their workplace and prevent it from compromising the quality of their work and their wellbeing. Each video clip describes in detail different strategies teachers themselves have found useful and effective in coping effectively with stress at work.

<sup>1</sup> These recommendations have been adapted from '**Teachers in Control: Managing the Stress of the Profession (2020)**' by Prof Carmel Cefai (University of Malta) and Dr John Malouff (University of New England, Australia).

## 2 Social Support

A problem shared is a problem halved.

Asking for help in times of difficulty, is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength, that we want to remain strong. Reaching out to others in times of difficulty, whether to fellow teachers, support or administrative staff, friends or family members, helps to reduce the experience of stress and its negative effects, enhance coping strategies, and have a positive effect on both physical or mental health. When we connect with another person, our body produces oxytocin, a neurochemical which has a positive impact on our physical health, particularly our cardiovascular system.

Social support at work can come from various sources and take various forms, such as emotional, instrumental and informational support, but a sense of collegiality amongst colleagues and feeling part of a professional learning community, are crucial ways to keep the negative impact of occupational stress at bay.

### Practical Recommendations

Ashley Emmerton, a high school teacher of English from Australia, describes how the social support she receives from her colleagues and friends, not only helps her to feel better emotionally but also gives her practical advice on how to handle the situation better.

She also gives support to colleagues in return, and this reciprocity helps also to strengthen her relationships with colleagues at work.

You can follow Ashley's video at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f\\_bwYfVnUKBUDbKjrH6VQF\\_SlaXPRey4/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f_bwYfVnUKBUDbKjrH6VQF_SlaXPRey4/view)

### 3 A Growth Mindset

Individuals with a growth mindset look at challenges and stress in more positive, constructive ways. They believe that they can improve their knowledge and develop their skills if they put enough dedication and effort in what they do. When faced with setbacks, they remain involved, adopt new strategies and use the strengths and resources they have to overcome difficulties.

Developing a growth mindset is essential for teachers to be able to manage challenges successfully and turn them into opportunities for growth and development. Growth mindset teachers engage in positive and optimistic thinking, particularly during setbacks, challenge unhelpful thoughts, and consequently overcome challenges with a positive attitude. They have confidence and self-belief in themselves as able and competent teachers, which in turn maintains their motivation and enthusiasm in their work. They thus become resilient teachers.

#### Practical Recommendations

Daniela Dimech, a middle school teacher of German and Head of Department from Malta, describes how she uses a range of techniques in managing stress at work, but she focuses in particular on adopting a growth mindset at her workplace.

This entails seeing stress as a learning experience and an opportunity for growth, acknowledging mistakes, accepting oneself and focusing on strengths, and embracing new paths and developing new skills in dealing with challenging situations.

You can follow Daniela's video at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VDpexsVY8NKQkzkmPpC6Rhi\\_hHUqUfxa/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VDpexsVY8NKQkzkmPpC6Rhi_hHUqUfxa/view)



## 4 Self-Regulation

Self-regulation ('self-control') involves controlling one's behaviour, emotions, and thoughts in the pursuit of long-term goals. The integration of cognitive self-regulation such as positive thinking, and emotional self-regulation, such as the management of strong emotions, leads to behavioural self-regulation, such as persistence, and goal-oriented behaviours.

Self-regulation helps one to act in accordance with one's values, be persistent in the face of difficulties, remain flexible and adapt to situations, make their best effort in what they do, remain calm, positive and optimistic, view challenges as learning opportunities and maintain control of the situation. Positive and effective self-regulatory coping strategies include social support, physical exercise, mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal.

### Practical Recommendations

Tabitha Rowe, an Assistant Head in a secondary school in the United Kingdom, underlines that there is no single stress management technique which works for all teachers in all situations all the time, but that each teacher will need to consider different options and find their own specific ways which work for them. However, she finds self-regulation as being very helpful in handling stressful situations at work and describes different techniques she makes use of to self-regulate, such as taking a step backwards, talking with colleagues, and looking ahead and planning beforehand.

You can follow Tabitha's video at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gj1pZuZVI4TfDmGkNtHk4YCuZ0Czv-gr/view>

## 5 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is becoming more and more one of the strategies of choice to deal with the negative thoughts and emotions resulting from stress at work. It is a useful technique to cultivate teachers' 'habits of mind' to promote their health, well-being and resilience and a pathway towards being caring and effective teachers.

Mindfulness helps us to go 'offline' and reduce the incessant 'noise' in our lives, so as to be with ourselves, focused on the present moment. It helps to repair the body and recharge our energy whilst making it possible for us to see things more in perspective and distinguish between things which are really important and those which are not as urgent and overwhelming as they seem to be.

Studies carried out with teachers reported significant positive benefits both for the teacher's classroom practice, such as enhanced relationships with students and more effective classroom management, as well as improved sense of well-being and health.

### Practical Recommendations

Eunice Freitas, a preschool and primary school teacher from Portugal, works with children with learning difficulties. She describes how she regularly uses mindfulness to reduce the negative impact of stress such as emotional distress and anxiety, through breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, becoming more aware of her thoughts, feelings and her body, and becoming more focused on the present moment. She maintains that mindfulness gives her strength and energy to cope effectively with the stress at work.

You can follow Eunice's video on at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zQ4LiBjKn8DeOAKRQuZasI9p9uDNBo7/view>



## 6 Self-care: physical exercise and leisure time

Taking care of ourselves, both physically and psychologically, is necessary in order to be able to take care of others. Self-care, such as getting enough sleep, healthy nutrition, leisure time, and physical exercise, is a very effective way to reduce the experience of stress and buffer the negative impact it may have on physical and mental health.

Ensuring regular 'time off' from work by engaging in enjoyable leisure activities is invaluable to help lead a balanced, fulfilling life, ensuring work does not take over one's life, whilst recharging one's energy at the same time.

Physical exercise is another highly effective strategy to reduce stress and maintain one's health and wellbeing. Its benefits as an effective stress reliever have been documented consistently by research. During exercise the brain produces neurotransmitters called (feel-good) endorphins which serve as antidote against stress, anxiety and depression. Regular exercise helps to reduce the negative effects of stress, improve mood, increase self-confidence, improve concentration, and lower symptoms of mild depression and anxiety.

### Practical Recommendations: Leisure time and hobbies

Viktorija Paškevičiene, a secondary school teacher of English from Lithuania, refers to an old Lithuanian saying that you cannot pour water from an empty cup, to illustrate that teachers need to keep themselves mentally and physically healthy in order to be effective in their work.

She describes how she uses her leisure time and hobbies to maintain a healthy work-life balance, mentioning two particular activities she is passionate about, namely voluntary work and art and crafts.

You can follow Viktorija's video at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/17R2k87oW4y7Mx8V66KbgEcIBFEI7Yhht/view>

### Practical Recommendations: Physical exercise

Shirley Huang, a primary school teacher of music and dance from Taiwan, says that she makes use of various stress management techniques but that her method of choice is physical exercise.

She describes various types of physical exercise she engages in, depending on the time and resources available, such as Yoga, tennis and mountain climbing amongst others. She encourages fellow teachers around the world to do regular exercise and 'just move their bodies' when they feel stressed.

You can follow Shirley's video at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SOgydgya3ZM\\_HjEzcV3Gnz1s5gUX1o-n/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SOgydgya3ZM_HjEzcV3Gnz1s5gUX1o-n/view)

## 7 Final Reflection

These stories of success and resilience should serve as an inspiration to fellow teachers across different cultures and contexts, on how they themselves in their own ways and according to their own contexts, may turn the challenges of the profession into opportunities to make a difference in the lives of so many children around the world, whilst enjoying a sense of fulfilment in their work



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