

Teacher Stress

Teaching is one of the most stressful occupations in the country, but introducing organizational and individual interventions can help minimize the negative effects of teacher stress.

Key Findings of Research

- Forty-six percent of teachers report high daily stress, which compromises their health, sleep, quality of life, and teaching performance.
- When teachers are highly stressed, students show lower levels of both social adjustment and academic performance.
- Interventions on the organizational or individual level, or those that reach both, can help reduce teacher stress by changing the culture and approach to teaching.
- Programs for mentoring, workplace wellness, social emotional learning, and mindfulness are all proven to improve teacher well-being and student outcomes.

There is a reasonably large body of published research evidence available which indicates that teaching is a 'highly' or 'extremely highly' stressful occupation for up to one-third of its professionals.

We all experience stress at work, no matter the job. But for teachers, the work seems to be getting harder and the stress harder to shake.

Although the figure varies by locality, about 40 to 50 per cent of our newest teachers leave within their first five years on the job. One in four teachers who leave teaching do so because of stress.

"They miss the kids and they miss teaching — but the demands of the job simply become too much."

With the advent of Professional Teaching Standards in 2011, all teachers — including those with extensive experience — were burdened with an additional administrative task designed to provide a framework for teacher professionalism and ongoing accreditation.

This means an experienced teacher's time is now spent documenting their own worth.

We've made it an adversarial profession, when it should be collegial. Teachers are competing for positions and constantly trying to make themselves look highly employable. What they should be focussed on is their students and their teaching.

Like many of the new teachers who leave, these more experienced professionals are disillusioned.

There is ongoing pressure on teachers to improve test results, lift the profile of the profession, meet the teaching standards and deliver — faultlessly — an overcrowded curriculum.

Symptoms

The following constitute some of the common effects of burnout suffered by teachers:

- tiredness and lack of energy
- tension and irritability
- cold symptoms
- swelling & aching joints and muscles
- chest back & stomach pains
- difficulties in breathing
- diarrhoea
- reduced libido
- frequent headaches
- depression
- nausea & dizziness
- loss of appetite
- insomnia

Stressors

There are many potential causes of teacher stress.

Test scores, performance reviews, and administrative observations.
Meetings, trainings, and other demands on your time.

Parents and marking, planning and rainy days, and students far below grade level. All while juggling life outside of school.

But there is one cause of teacher stress that surpasses them all.

It's something that is particularly frustrating, bringing more sleepless nights than all the others put together.

It's mentally and physically taxing. It's burdensome and time-consuming. It's relentless and seemingly never-ending.

It's also completely avoidable.

So what is it?

The worst cause of teacher stress is trying to *convince* students to behave. It's a reliance on your words to get them under control. It's the belief that you are the problem, that their bad decisions are because of your inability to push the right buttons. In other words, it's taking responsibility for *their* misbehaviour.

Classroom management

Stressors include

- Lack of student motivation
- Students who are unwilling to learn
- Students misbehaving
- Feeling helpless to make a real difference to the lives of students

Pressure from administration

- Being told to teach in certain ways
- Adopting new strategies after many years of teaching
- As a new teacher finding the pressures of teaching shackle them

Lack of support by administration

- Frustration caused by lack of support
- The effort and guts needed to approach administration for support
- Listening to new reports that suggest a few changes with improve outcomes
- Lack of access to information about the school

Other common sources of teacher stress

- Guilt over calling in sick
- Stress related to not setting boundaries on the volume of work teachers do
- Poor teacher-student relationships
- Time pressure
- Role conflict
- Poor working conditions
- Lack of control and decision-making power
- Poor collegial relationships
- Extra-organisational stressors

Poor student-teacher relationships may arise when:

- students lack motivation and respect for teachers.
- there are classroom behaviour problems.
- there is miscommunication or lack of understanding between the teacher and students of different class/ethnic/cultural backgrounds.

Time pressures may arise when:

- there is inadequate time for preparation.
- unrealistic deadlines are imposed.
- there are issues concerning workload.
- Role conflicts may arise when:
- there are conflicts between teaching philosophies within the school.
- education department policies demand innovation and change.
- administrative demands and paperwork are excessive.

Poor working conditions may arise when:

- class sizes are too big.
- the school is geographically isolated.

Lack of control and decision-making power arises when:

- the bureaucratic structure of school is very hierarchical and power is concentrated in the hands the 'few'.
- there is autocratic leadership.

Poor colleague relationships may arise when:

- there is a lack of trust/or cooperation between colleagues.
- there is a competitiveness in the school culture.
- Feelings of personal inadequacy may arise when:
 - teachers feel incompetent or poorly trained.
 - teachers are required to teach outside of their areas of competence and training.
- there is inadequate praise or recognition for achievement from peers and school leaders.

Extra-organisational stressors may arise when:

- there are negative community attitudes towards teachers and schools.
- teachers personal lives and relationships are unstable/insecure.

Public image of teachers

- community acceptance of less compliant behaviour.
- media reinforcing student perceptions that their education won't lead to a job.
- compulsory attendance by older students who would once have left school.
- increasing reporting of breakdown in traditional family structures.
- increasing private access by students to technology & videos.
- undermining of traditional authority in the media (police, doctors & teachers).

Workload

Overwhelmingly, teachers identified workload as a key issue.

Comments included:

"Not enough time in the day to complete everything that needs to be done. Increase[d] load of paperwork and assessment."

"Too many meetings... 3 a week..."

"The requirements for tracking student progress; reporting to parents; and engaging family involvement in student learning (to name but a few)..."

"The paperwork (sometimes in duplicate) takes over."

"Too many tasks to complete in an eight hour day."

"I feel stressed that I cannot be both a good mum and a good teacher because of workload and being exhausted most of the time."

"Paperwork, meetings, balance of work and family time"

"When a 55-60 hour week is the exception, not the norm"

Alongside these and other general comments on workload, some specific areas were mentioned:

Professional Development:

Comments identified Professional Development as a specific source of pressure, either because of the volume of it (5 comments) or because it is done and then never implemented (3 comments) which staff said left them feeling that precious time was wasted.

"...so little time to create meaningful lessons because of professional development. Always navel gazing and not producing results..."

"we do what is asked of us then it kind of goes nowhere"

"...our school doing every initiative going..."

National Standards and Testing:

Also mentioned were National Standards and the volume of testing (11 comments) and fast-changing education policies (3 comments).

"Seemingly back-to-back testing"

"having to assign a below OTJ [Overall Teacher Judgement] to children at 40 weeks, when I know that they will be totally fine by 80 or 120 weeks, they just need a little more time"

"too much assessment of 5 year olds"

Management and Colleagues

A large number of respondents commented on the negative impact of colleagues, mentioning staff bullying (25 comments), poor leaders (16 comments), pressure from management, poor teamwork and disrespectful behaviour (7 comments) and overly negative colleagues (3 comments) as causes of stress and anxiety.

Comments on management:

"Not enough realistic support from management."

"Principal blaming poor ERO report on teachers... Seeing colleagues depressed and talking of suicide"

"Unrealistic expectations from management that teachers say yes to because they are all scared to tell the truth.:"

"We have a dysfunctional senior management..."

"Poor management ... lack of communication, lack of follow up..."

"Bullying Principal who has systematically gotten rid of teachers who support the policies and work of the previous principal..."

"Bullied by Principal, DP and AP"

Comments on teams and colleagues:

"Leading a frustrating team..."

"Trying to work with adults who don't want to change their practice."

"Being made to feel inadequate by teaching colleagues"

"Workplace bullying"

"I am an experienced teacher... I have had derogatory comments... considered a 'dinosaur'"

"Politics between staff."

"... have an extremely difficult staff member in my team and am continually handling complaints from parents and other staff about [that person]"

Parents:

Perhaps surprisingly, the factor most frequently mentioned in the comments as causing teacher stress was pressure from parents (35

comments), with only two mentions of the lack of parent support being an issue and 33 commenting on this. Comments included:

"unrealistic expectations from parents"

"pushy aggressive parents"

"...expectation from parents that teachers should be able to 'fix' students who are not meeting standards... that it's not part of a parent's role to assist students in their learning"

"parental gripes"

"Parents ... not allowing their children to develop their key competencies"

"Parents not reading emails, paper newsletters or notice boards and then getting frustrated that they were not well informed."

"Parent behaviour"

"Parent demands"

"Parent expectation/pressure/lack of support has also been a factor at times."

"Overbearing parents"

Students:

It is, perhaps, telling that student behaviour was very rarely identified in the comments as the cause of stress (3 respondents), with much more focus on concerns about meeting students' educational, emotional and health needs adequately (over 20 respondents). Of these, eight specifically mentioned special educational needs, five mentioned lack of funding or resources to support students as being of concern, and three mentioned out-of-school factors such as poor housing and health concerns.

(This feedback should be considered alongside that relating to testing and National Standards (above), which also had at its heart concern regarding the impact on students.)

Comments included:

"It's about the lack of adequate funding to resource the support systems we need."

"We need a calm space in the school...that is manned by a counsellor for our students whose lives are just too challenging today."

"5 students, 1 supported... others not diagnosed"

"...teachers are parenting, feeding, psychoanalysing children as well as getting the child to national standard"

"hugely diverse needs of my learners ... never enough time to plan and deliver a fully differentiated programme..."

"No help for children who come from a terrible home life to school..."

"children with special needs or high learning needs taking ages to be diagnosed at CDC and even longer... before funding is available for extra assistance..."

"Social issues in families and the wider community"

"Having children with special needs who don't get funding or a diagnosis quick enough to help support them."

Overcoming Stress

Mentoring and workplace wellness programs can help reduce stress. Teachers who receive mindfulness training "showed reduced psychological distress and time urgency — which is this feeling like you don't have enough time.

Translation: These teachers were better able to cope with classroom challenges and manage their feelings, which made it easier for them to manage their students' big feelings.

Things teachers can do to reduce their stress levels:

- Awareness
- Taking responsibility for action
- Cognitive clarity
- Reflection
- Using strategic resources

Contemporary research on low burnout teaching indicates that proactive measures can be taken across five dimensions to foster wellbeing. These dimensions should not be considered as mutually exclusive or definitive.

Awareness

Being aware of the problem and taking responsibility for it is the first step to fixing the problem of burnout. It is especially important to be aware that in almost all cases of burnout, the fault is not with you, but with the situation you are working in. However, most people have much more control over the lives and situations than they realise, and understanding this is a way to move forward from feelings of helplessness to a feeling that you do have strength to do something about it.

Taking responsibility for action

Once you are aware of the problem, it is important to take responsibility to do something about it. Your feelings will shift from 'what is wrong with me' to "what can I do about changing my environment to make it more pleasant and facilitative for me to accomplish my personal and professional goals". This is problematic in some ways, as you have

become aware that the problem is not with you but with your work environment. It is not uncommon to feel that your workplace should do something about the problem; however these feelings will only lead to further resentment. Taking responsibility for your own mental and physical health means being willing to force changes on your work environment.

Cognitive Clarity

When suffering burnout, it is hard to have the clarity to see what can and cannot be changed. Some aspects of bureaucracy cannot be changed, however some in their cynicism believe nothing can be changed, and those are the people most likely to leave the profession. Gaining insight and clarity into what can be changed about your profession is an important step to moving forward from burnout

Reflection

Too often, the importance of reflective action is undermined in education systems. When teachers do not have the time for adequate reflection, there is a risk that they will not foresee their own decline into burnout. In this way, reflective practise can be a way of avoiding burnout. However, reflection can also work as a tool for moving on from burnout. This could be in the form of keeping a reflective journal, where you could document your feelings, your ideas about how to change your situation, and so on. There would also be an opportunity to look back on your journal to see how your journey back to a healthy mental state has panned out

Using Strategic Resources

Fostering personal wellbeing is linked 'to understand[ing] the nature of our pupils difficulties'. Teachers should be active in noting student responses to different pedagogies, which requires active empathy and an ability to read emotions in others.

A teacher's wellbeing may be predicted positively or negatively in direct proportion to their effectiveness with their most difficult children.

Thoughts on what needs to change?

Clearly there are many and diverse, often overlapping, causes of teacher stress and anxiety, but certain themes are evident. Workload is the most glaring issue, closely followed by internal and external pressures on teachers who do not always feel adequately equipped to deal with those pressures or supported in doing so.

Conclusion

The escalating teacher crisis is affecting students' educational outcomes, impacting teachers' health, and costing Australian schools millions of dollars each year. Research suggests improving school organization, job demands, support and autonomy, and personal emotional resources for teachers.

What to do next?

This report on teacher stress forms part of the Teacher Engagement and Wellbeing Program available from MONED.

You can learn more about the Teacher Engagement and Wellbeing Program including having a workshop conducted in your school at www.moned.net

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