



Stress Without Distress in 2012

by JUDY BERANGER

Being successful in your teaching, having a solid philosophy of life, loving wisely, asking for help, cultivating interests, being patient and putting first things first, all go a long way toward ensuring that regular life stressors do not escalate to distress. The most normal and necessary events in our lives are stressful – as well as beneficial and pleasurable – but sometimes they cause distress. Some personality types appear to be more prone to distress than others. Most teachers are resilient, constantly adapting and reframing. Teachers, using humour as a strategy for example, “can tell it is a full moon without looking outside” as they reframe challenging classroom situations. It is critical to address unchecked stress or else risk the onset of potentially long-term negative effects on our bodies, our family and work environments.

Holding a glass of water for a few minutes is easy. Holding that same glass of water for an hour or longer creates progressive discomfort proportionate to the time held. In each case it is the same weight, but like stress, the longer it is held, the heavier it becomes. Eyebrows rose when Hans Selye, the first major researcher on stress, suggested that chronic stress causes physical disease. Neuroscience confirms that stress can harm our health by leading us to unhealthy habits such as poor sleep patterns, overeating, drinking, gambling, smoking, and other addictions. Ongoing stress keeps cortisol levels high, increasing our likelihood of getting sick. There is no way to avoid the bumps and bruises that come our way but we do have the capacity to identify our own unique stressors as well as to choose how to respond to them.

Between family and work responsibilities teachers are very familiar with the way stress can affect health and well-being. Whether intentional or unconscious, we can be adept at ignoring symptoms of stress. However, the body can run out of patience with the added burden of ignoring stress and will eventually make its discomfort known in one way or another. When stressed, chemicals released from the brain immediately go to the adrenal glands. These glands then send out their own chemicals that prime the body for heightened responses thereby increasing

body processes such as heart rate and respiration. If prolonged, this state of intensity can move the body to a state of distress.

Researchers from the University of Montreal, Harvard, and John Hopkins studying the impact of stress, have discovered protective caps of human genes called “telomeres” (similar to plastic caps on the ends of shoelaces to stop them from fraying), that can deteriorate prematurely when stress is not contained. Picture that!! This distress can cause increased muscle tension, blood pressure, poor concentration, depression, anxiety, panic, premature aging and diseases including cardiovascular, impaired immune system, high cholesterol, weight gain and, as one moves toward middle age, an increased risk of dementia. In addition, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority and living in an “imaginary world” are not uncommon for people in distress.

The same mechanism that initiates the stress response can also turn it off by no longer sending panic messages. You can use your thinking to move you to action – thereby changing your physiology for the better, improving health, creating a relaxation response and letting go of tension.

Consider these stress-reducing breaks:

- Progressive relaxation can be practiced in a chair. Tense each muscle or muscle group for five to ten seconds and then relax for twenty to thirty seconds. Let go of the tension.
- Breathing techniques: hold one nostril closed and inhale deeply through the other one for three seconds. Release your covered nostril and cover the opposite one, then exhale in a short burst. Switch sides and repeat the cycle. This is known to energize both sides of the brain for a quick mental boost while increasing oxygen.
- Yoga Stretch: Get down on all fours, then walk your hands forward and drop your forehead to the floor. Deep breathe and hold for one minute. This pose stretches the shoulders and elongates the spine, helping release built up upper body stress. The slight inversion calms the nervous system.
- Standing up straight with your legs hip-width apart and knees slightly bent, let your arms dangle by your sides, hands in soft fists. Slowly twist your torso from

right to left for 30 seconds. Let your arms and hands rotate freely and gently tap your lower back and stomach. This stretch engages and massages internal organs, balancing energy flow.

- General stretching: Any combination of stretching and conscious breathing has a calming effect on mind and mood. Sitting comfortably on the floor, gently draw your left foot in toward your groin, keeping your knee as close to the floor as possible. Cross your right leg over your left, placing the sole of your right foot on the floor, and slowly twist your torso to the right. Hold the pose for 3 to 10 deep breaths, switch sides and repeat.
- Monitor posture: Dr. James Laird of Worcester University reports that improving posture boosts mood. The brain uses body clues to gauge how it should feel, and it alters neurotransmitter production accordingly.
- Acupressure points: Learn relaxing acupressure points. Apply pressure to the point located in the hollow below your collarbone, next to the breastbone, and hold for 20 to 30 seconds. (This area is related to emotion and experts say that it can release some of the blocked energy that triggers stress).
- Massage is well known to reduce stress and have a calming effect as it reduces the stress hormone cortisol, increases levels of the soothing hormone oxytocin and boosts the immune system.
- Visualize and be specific about what you want in life. If you set, write and visualize goals it is more likely that you will not only feel less stressed but you may also discover new talents and passions. (My father took up painting after his major stroke five years ago. With his non-dominant left hand he continues to surprise himself and our family with this new talent.)
- Looking forward with an appreciative attitude helps counteract stress and anxiety. A fun University research study found that tense people will walk by a \$5 bill placed strategically within their peripheral vision. Relaxed people spot the cash! More often than not, tense people tend to see through a cloudy, restrictive lens.

There are thousands of stress-reducing, health-maintaining ideas and tips. Although we have heard most of them before, it remains a challenge for many of us to put them into practice. The simple things are the important things. A sampling of the tried and true includes:

- If over tired, have your iron levels checked.
- Close blinds to promote longer sleep.
- Take consistent time for a pleasurable hobby/activity.
- Exercise at least three times per week. Put your sneakers next to your bed and commit to a walk first thing next day.

- Include lots of fruit, veggies and omega 3 in your diet.
- Ensure adequate protein in your diet. (e.g., add a little whey powder to pancake, smoothies, etc. Whey protein is derived from milk, is easy to digest and supplies essential amino acids your body can't produce on its own.)
- A multivitamin goes a long way to keep cellular damage at bay.
- Green tea – reduces production of the fat storing cortisol in half. Studies show that green tea improves metabolism and its compounds block the absorption of sugar.
- Focused breathing helps with keeping energy flow and balance.
- Try to have 8 glasses of water each day.
- Take five minute stretch breaks during the workday (2 hour intervals).
- Keep your living environment clean. Mould flourishes on damp windowsills, shower curtains, and exposure to its spores can leave you tired.
- Give genuine compliments, be specific and practice reframing negative situations. Dr. Herbert Benson says this soothes the cortisol producing adrenal glands. Experts in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine* report that positive emotions release chemicals that strengthen the immune system as does helping others.
- Hugging, touching and smooching jump start the brain's production of dopamine, a calming hormone that soothes nerves and reduces blood pressure. Physical contact with pets has a similar effect.
- If you are not feeling well it is important to report symptoms to a physician – especially if they linger longer than three weeks. Keep track of any reoccurring symptoms.

Stress is a normal and inevitable reality of life. Statements that once frustrated us like, “Must be nice to only work from 8:00 to 3:00 and have the summers free” no longer have an impact, when we choose to reframe, not be reactive and to focus on being a good influence. Fortunately, if we are well, we have the capacity to manage stress in a way that can enhance our well-being and contribute to our effectiveness both in the classroom and in our lives.

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