

Awareness and Action

THE KEY TO REMAINING WELL

by [Kathy Burford](#)

In the May/June 1999 issue of The Bulletin an article titled "[Teachers Taking Action](#)," provided information about how to be active and keep fit. The importance of starting such a program was emphasized in enhancing and maintaining your health and wellness. This school year, there will be more articles that relate to teacher health and wellness and you will be encouraged to take steps to improve your health and, in turn, your personal well-being.

This article contains ten important areas which offer suggestions that you can begin implementing today. If you have already started to make pro-active choices to take better care of yourself, then you already know the rewards of making such a decision. If you haven't started yet, it is never too late to consider some of what is suggested and to start doing something positive for yourself.

Get adequate sleep and plan periods of rest

A teacher's day is typically long and often stressful. If you find yourself continually staying up late, and then going to bed unable to sleep because your mind is still going over the day's events, you are headed for exhaustion and possibly burnout. If you rely on coffee during the day, you might reduce your consumption to only a cup in the morning. Alcohol, as well, disrupts sleep and should not be consumed at least several hours before retiring. Planned physical activities are helpful in helping a person relax more in the evening so that falling asleep becomes easier. Naps after work can work against you by making it more difficult to drift off to sleep at bedtime.

Outside of the classroom, you may be the teacher who always volunteers for additional activities only to find yourself regretting it afterwards. You may find yourself in this position because: a) you have always done it and no one else knows how; or, b) no one else volunteers and you have a hard time saying "no". Unfortunately, many teachers who have followed this path find themselves exhausted with little energy left to cope with the demands of living. Alternatively, just try saying, "no, I'm not able to take that on at this time," and use the time to rest and re-charge your batteries.

Find a balance of work and play in your daily planning and organize your time and energy more realistically. A good way to start is by being aware of your own energy limits. A person will do more efficient and effective work by taking reasonable rest breaks.

Eat well and maintain a healthy weight

You are what you eat and if you are not eating well it will show up in how you feel. Take the time to become informed about healthy foods. Limit or eliminate most fats in your diet as well as the temptation to eat fast foods and pre-packaged meals. Increase your consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains in your diet. Pay attention to your calories. A little exercise or physical activity is a good strategy for controlling or maintaining a healthy weight.

Learn relaxation, breathing, & visualization techniques

An easy, no cost, efficient way to better your health is learning deep breathing when you begin to feel uptight and edgy. When a person is under stress their breathing becomes shallow. Deep breathing for a few minutes will drain away tightness and tension and is a quick way to calm oneself. Another relaxation method is to sit comfortably in a chair for a 5-10 minute period and tighten and relax your muscles beginning with the toes and moving through sections of your body, ending with your face and forehead muscles. Then stretch your head from side to side to relieve any tension in your neck which will help relax you at the same time. Many people are often surprised, when tightening their facial muscles and relaxing them, to find there was tension there in the first place. When you are in a relaxed and calm state, think of a pleasant place, or a pleasurable situation. These thoughts can easily be retrieved and used for calming when you are faced with a frustrating or annoying situation. It will help you to have a few moments to gain perspective and handle a situation in a calmer manner.

Pay attention to your attitude & don't sweat the small stuff

How often do we go through life reacting to people and events outside of our influence and control? While we don't have external control, we do have internal control over how we react and deal with people and situations. If we are finding ourselves overwhelmed with external matters and are in a negative frame of mind, it is time to stop and reflect on what is

really important. Is it worth being bitter and getting sick over things that we can't change?

Develop a sense of humour and get a life

Norman Cousins, a renowned physician dealing with his own serious illness found that laughter helped him get well. He watched funny movies during his long hospital stays and subsequently regained his health. Laughter heals and is the shortest distance between people. Have you ever laughed so hard that your facial muscles ached or tears ran down your face? Do you recall how you felt afterwards? Do you find that you take yourself and perhaps your work too seriously?

Be active and keep yourself fit

Many illnesses are avoidable if people would be willing to trade inactivity for physical activity. Some teachers have reported that when they started regular physical activities, they noticed positive improvements in their physical stamina, ability to cope with stress, reduction in blood pressure and weight and increased energy. If, for example, you can become involved with walking, skating, lawn raking, biking, skiing, running, or whatever you like to do, three times a week for 30 minutes each day, you will likely notice the benefits. Over time, you can increase the number of days per week as your time and body allows. But if you are a person who has not done any physical activity for a time, be sure to check with your physician before you begin. And of course, any physical activity should be done with warm up stretching, comfortable shoes and clothing.

Learn to let go of negativity

How often do we harbour grudges that seem to "eat away" at our spirit? Grudges, big and small, can keep us stuck forever in a negative cycle. If this is something that applies to you, make the effort to get beyond the issue and turn your attention to getting on with living.

Maintain a balance between work and home and learn to play and have fun

Managing your time is a skill. It takes work but when you are in the driver's seat you are in control. Find time to play and have fun doing activities that you find enjoyable and relaxing.

Maintain caring relationships with friends and family

Nothing zaps energy more than spending time with negative or abusive individuals. Teaching involves relating to different kinds of people. Some of these encounters may not necessarily be favourable, but keep the negative ones down to a minimum. Outside of school, maintain and develop relationships that make you feel good as a person. In the long run, spending time with positive and caring people will carry you through the more difficult encounters. If at all possible, avoid, limit, or restrict your time with negative and energy-draining individuals. Plan time in your life for positive relationships for they will boost not only your energy level but also your self esteem.

Listen to your body when it is speaking to you

Our bodies are finely tuned instruments that work for us rather than against us. When we are ill, it is important to use our illness as an ally and to ask what our body is trying to say. Do we need to slow down? Are we putting too much energy in one area of our lives at the expense of another? Have we neglected our spirit and are unhappy with our present choices? There is no time like the present to take stock and review our values, needs, hopes and desires. Being aware opens the door to our many positive choices towards wellness.

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