



Facing the Classroom... Head On!

by CLAUDETTE E S COOMBS

If you are a new teacher just starting out, a seasoned master returning for year 30 or, are anywhere in between, facing the classroom in September brings a mix of emotions. The anticipatory highs and the apprehension of uncertainty combine to create an adrenaline flow to match the energy of opening day.

For any teacher, the beginning of the school year is the ideal time to set personal guidelines and boundaries for self care and survival. We tend to automatically focus on work goals and priorities. However, given the stressors of the teaching environment, it is imperative that we consider the impact that our chosen career has on our lives and relationships and to establish our personal goals and priorities. Think of these goals as your "new year's resolutions". The first step to achieving goals is to clarify them. *Define your personal priorities for the year.* These may be to monitor and enhance personal health; keep family in the forefront; or plan for an exciting future. Now that you have direction, *make choices that create an environment conducive to achieving goals.* That means choosing healthy and constructive options for self care, relationship building or future management... whatever your goals require. The final step to ensure success is to *take action which supports your choices.* This may include formalizing your choices by actually paying the membership fees at a selected class; engaging a friend or partner as coach to keep you on task; or committing to fit personal things in your schedule as firmly as work.

Self care requires consideration of all aspects of personal well-being. We usually know what we need but rarely make the determined effort to ensure that our needs are given due time, energy and commitment. Reflect on the things you need to feel healthy, happy and in control of your life. If you don't have these resources, develop a strategy to put them in place. Protecting our physical and emotional health isn't a luxury. It is a necessity. If we feel that we can't afford to concentrate our time or other resources on ourselves then we're wrong. We can't afford not to. The airline has good reason for instructing you, in an emergency situation, to put on your own oxygen mask before

helping someone else. Think about that. Of course you want to help your child, parent or the less able person sitting next to you. However, if you pass out due to lack of oxygen, your child may never get his mask on and both of you suffer.

We sometimes reject the emphasis on self care because we think it means "either" – "or". *Either* I spend time on you *or* I spend time on me, not both. Instead, it actually means "first" – "then". First I prepare myself for my role, then I am able to help meet the needs of others. This is true in our professional and personal lives. We wouldn't consider trying to teach a course without reviewing the curriculum, noting the objectives and developing lesson plans. Why do we believe that we can, or must, endure the physical and emotional demands of doing a job, making a relationship work or achieving the top of Maslow's pyramid, without first giving our bodies and minds what is needed to succeed in meeting those challenges? As a review, here's what we need: a body as physically healthy as it can be; an attitude which can support us through the difficulties which surely lie in wait; knowledge which allows healthy choices; and skills which promote growth and achievement. If you want, go back to the Primary school health curriculum to be reminded of the basic components of health – sleep, rest, nutrition, exercise and recreation. If we get those in the right balance, we're well ahead of the majority.

New Teachers

Being a student doesn't totally prepare you for the new experiences as a teacher in the school environment. You may feel overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility and the need to understand and meet the expectations within the school climate. Policies and general practices, workload, extra-curricular involvement, student behaviour, classroom norms, and academic standards will each present issues to be handled and accommodated. In adjusting to these new demands, be sure to take advantage of the resources at your disposal. Senior teachers have "been there". Talk to them and seek their professional assistance and moral support. The NLTA,

including the Professional Development Division and the Virtual Teacher Centre, offers a variety of resources to equip you for the classroom. Teaching strategies, classroom management techniques, lesson plans and links to other supports are among the things they offer. The Employee Assistance Program is available for personal support and skills development in helping you secure and maintain personal balance between your job and the rest of your life. Get to know the staff and services of the NLTA and make use of them.

A word of caution: your days of functioning solely as a student are part of the past! Now you need to put in place your long-term strategies for personal growth and satisfaction. Your younger body may have recovered from the week-long, all-night study binges before finals or the exhaustion as you pushed to get those last assignments completed. Back then you worked on a semester basis where the pressure lifted at the end of exams. Now, it's important to establish routines and schedules that meet your new demands and leave no room for procrastination. The block of work time has become ten months instead of four and there are a lot more people depending on your attitude, energy and organization. Be careful to set up work and personal habits which promote good health.

Returning Teachers

Returning to familiar ground has some advantages. As a returning teacher, with a few exceptions, you already know the material, staff, students, school atmosphere, behaviour and work level. In contrast, introducing any change presents new opportunities, challenges, variety and a chance to learn from interactions with another group of professionals and students. If you are experiencing a sense of repetition at returning to the same setting, seeking change can enhance the appeal of another year. A different setting, new position or responsibilities, different courses or even volunteering for new extra-curricular activities or school committees will give the opportunity for new experiences and can bring excitement to a familiar setting.

For returning teachers, change in role may have been requested or involuntary. Either way, there are necessary adjustments to ensure a relatively smooth transition to accomplishing new duties and expectations.

When change is involuntary there is often a sense of a loss of control or a feeling of being manipulated. This happens when we believe that someone else determines our fate and is especially problematic when the change is undesirable. The pains of unwanted change can be eased when there is a spirit of cooperation and accommodation expressed by those implementing the change. If this doesn't seem apparent, talk to those in charge to express your concerns and seek improvement.

This may create a better atmosphere, if not, it is up to you to seek additional intervention or to adjust your personal expectations and goals for that setting.

A Message to Administrators

As the leader in your school community you also take responsibility for your staff. You are a significant source of guidance and support in your actions to assist in setting appropriate limits and priorities and in promoting early intervention when you recognize signs of difficulty or overload. However, you may need a reminder to be careful of your own needs. Know when you are reaching your limits and take action to acquire the support and direction which could benefit you.

Planning for Success

Whether you are a new or returning teacher, you will be exposed to issues which require your planning. The better prepared you are, the more likely it is that you will successfully conquer the obstacles to achieving peak performance. *Conflict* is a common concern. It can be interpersonal conflict with staff, parents or students or intra-personal conflict as you adjust to a new system of operating in an environment where someone else has determined the rules. Establishing personal boundaries and learning appropriate means of conflict resolution can do a great deal to minimize our distress. *Expectations*, especially the unrealistic ones, of family, school, community or even self tend to pose the most significant sources of stress. Learning to understand and adjust expectations is the best way to prevent them from overtaking our peace of mind. *Workload* is a constant cause of mental and physical fatigue. This reflects considerably on our sense of duty. We want to do the best job with the most preparation in every situation. We need to keep the simple rule of economics in mind, our resources are limited and when we use time or energy on one thing, it isn't available for something else. At times we must select where our resources are to be spent, even to the exclusion of other important needs. Setting priorities and confirming expectations will make these decisions a little easier.

Best wishes as you start your year, and always be reminded of your reasons for choosing teaching as a career. Experiencing the reality of those reasons is integral to maintaining a sense of satisfaction and peace in our lives.

Claudette Coombs is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Marie Wall (ext. 265).

“The beginning of the school year is the ideal time to set personal guidelines and boundaries for self care and survival.”
