



Summer is Over ... But the Enjoyment Isn't

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Summer serves so many purposes for teachers but some of the top priorities include relaxation and enjoyment. We use the school break to rejuvenate our spirit via assorted venues. We may even take a course to enhance our professional (or financial) status. As the year progresses we anticipate the summer break where we have no lesson plans or exams and most of all, no rigid schedule. We can rest, holiday, picnic, travel, renovate the house, stay at the cabin, do anything or do nothing! The freedom to choose provides immense psychological satisfaction.

As the temperature starts to cool off and the calendar shows an ever-increasing closeness to that opening day of school, we may feel a sense of sadness, apprehension or even a fleeting moment of dread. We focus on the changes that we frequently interpret in a negative way. We see more constraints, fewer opportunities to engage in social or personal pursuits, more demands on our time and energy, and less freedom. In reality, the changes are just that, changes. They are neither negative nor positive. We attribute those judgements according to our own perspectives, attitudes and general outlook on life.

Back to School

Going back to school signifies a change in routine, a more demanding schedule and a myriad of additional stressors for most teachers. It should not mean that we put our personal lives on hold until the next holiday. Nor does it mean that our professional lives should be devoid of pleasure. We became teachers because we wanted to work with students, watch them grow, encourage a fascination with learning and favourably influence the direction of their lives. Well, the students are still there and each year we get another chance to fulfill our professional goals, just in case last year didn't quite turn out as we had hoped.

Now, as a preventive measure, we need to focus not on our impact on students, but on their impact on us. We readjust to the school routine with its physical and mental challenges, but with added

stressors things can quickly become unmanageable and overwhelming. If we don't maintain a healthy balance, we succumb and pay an unnecessary toll on our health, relationships and quality of life.

Preserve the Benefits

To preserve the physical and mental benefits of summer, we must diligently protect our personal resources and maintain reasonable components of our "holiday" lifestyle. The trick is to stay happy and healthy while still getting the job done. Although this may sound like an impossible task, we may not need to make drastic changes to our work routine. Instead, including small changes can have a radical impact on our well-being.

Review the many functions which the summer holiday serves. The time away from school acts as a tool to identify things which we enjoy, refresh our spirit and revitalize our body. It reminds us of the importance of including those in our lives year round and it can be a practice session for building pleasantries into our regular agenda.

Despite our intentions to retain a healthy lifestyle, daily priorities often change with the conditions surrounding us. Staying healthy, motivated and satisfied throughout the school year depends on ensuring that we reserve time and energy for the important personal components of our lives. Among other things, these include: relationships, health, personal growth and future goals. Protecting time, space and energy requires our permission. We must first believe that it is necessary to reserve resources for ourselves, and then believe that we have a right to do so. In reality, it is an obligation. We have made commitments to our employer, our families and friends and to ourselves. To fulfill those commitments, we must protect ourselves.

Staying healthy also depends on feeling professionally content that we are doing the job we want to do. This means that we are confident in our subject area, comfortable with our interpersonal interactions and enjoy most aspects of our role as a teacher.

The benefits include relative harmony and health. There will be occasional discord, but building in time for personal supports keeps things in perspective and allows for the best possible health under the given circumstances. The consequences of ignoring personal needs are encapsulated in the word “stress”. All avenues suffer if we neglect the basics of self-care.

Strategies for Staying Healthy

Some strategies can be easily incorporated into our lives without too much difficulty or resistance. The adoption of other strategies poses a greater challenge. Select the things that best suit your interests, resources and lifestyle. But as a minimum, consider the following areas when planning to make healthy changes.

Adjust expectations. Whether they are for yourself or others, having expectations that are unrealistic is a major source of distress and often leads to unsuccessful attempts at change. Avoid creating conflict between intentions and reality, due to unrealistic expectations.

Identify and fulfill personal essentials. First know what you need. While some people need solitude, others feel they can't possibly exist without an active social life or a personal fitness program. Then establish a routine which allows you to meet your needs.

Monitor and control stress. Stay in tune with your body and your spirit. Learn to quickly identify when things are moving out of balance. Acquire the skills and employ personal stress management practices which are appropriate for you. If you want direction or support, contact your EAP Coordinator.

Incorporate pleasure. We may choose to do something for a variety of reasons, but we choose to continue because doing so has sufficient rewards. Everyday life should be filled with a variety of rewards. Teaching days should be sprinkled with pleasant moments. There are mundane and arduous tasks in all aspects of our lives, but to retain the thrill of life we must incorporate pleasures as well. When we allow the joy to escape, be overlooked or take a low priority – we lose, unnecessarily.

Just as we set and follow outcome-based curriculum plans, we must also establish personal goals and action plans to address desired outcomes. Setting short-term goals and employing adequate strategies assists us in overriding the daily factors which interfere with our success.

For specific tips on healthy strategies check the Wellness articles on the NLTA website.

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