

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO
TEACHER

WELLBEING

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ELIZABETH HOLMES

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For Michael – whose sheer joy of life and abundant love contributes immeasurably to my own wellbeing.



CONTENTS

<i>The author</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Wellbeing matters	4
2 All about stress	11
3 Stress and teaching	20
4 Making stress work for you	28
5 Asking for help	35
6 Strategies for every day	44
7 Anxiety	61
8 Transforming sleep	72
9 Maintaining balance	79
Afterword	97
Some reading	99
<i>Index</i>	105

4

MAKING STRESS WORK FOR YOU



DEADLINES **GOALS** **STRESS**
PRIORITISATION **STRESS**
NO! POSITIVES
Communication **Assumptions**
Pareto principle

CAN STRESS WORK?

Let us be entirely realistic here. Stress *can* work for us. And we *can* use it as a motivator to making much needed changes or rising to the challenge. But stress also kills. And the line between the good stuff and the bad may be imperceptible. Making the most of stress before it tips us into distress is dependent on us knowing where to draw the line. We can be supported in this – coaxed and nurtured – but ultimately we must decide alone where our limits are. Keep that in mind. If in doubt, stop. Your life is worth more than whatever may be your current stressors. Taking time out to focus on preventing negative stress from taking hold is always wise.

On the assumption that you are on the motivating side of the line, these suggestions for making stress work for you may help.

WISE GOALS

Whether you are setting life goals or daily goals, there are a few key ideas to keep in mind.

- Be utterly realistic. It is far better to accomplish goals than set yourself such high targets that you can only fail. Being realistic does not imply underachievement. It simply suggests that you strive in a way that is not going to wreck your health!
- Make sure that your goals are motivating. If you are not inspired by them, then don't expect yourself to commit to them.
- In setting your goals, use the impetus and drive that the positive stress is giving you. Utilise that sense of urgency.
- Be as specific as you can about what you are seeking to achieve. Set time limits.
- Create goals that have definable end points so that it is clear when you have achieved them.
- Find a way to record your goals that works well for you. Bullet journals are very popular (take a look at Pinterest for ideas). Writing goals down helps to clarify your intention.
- Reflect on goals achieved and goals yet to be achieved. Ditch any that no longer serve you.
- Use this habit of crafting and recording goals to refine your direction each day.

RUTHLESS PRIORITISATION

Teachers under pressure have to be ruthless over what gets attention. And while we cannot really *manage* time – it passes at the same rate each day regardless of our interventions – we can learn to ration our efforts and energy according to the time we have available to us. Crucial, when every day is overloaded.

Once again, the importance of knowing your capabilities and limits (we all have them, it is nothing negative) is key. Some thoughts:

- Look at the time you have available and the tasks you must complete. Now consider your energy levels and motivation and allocate time accordingly. Be ruthless. Aside from the stuff that *has* to be done, choose what is important and effective.

- Be mindful of deadlines. Missing them can add to the stress of others, but they must be set realistically. If you have deadlines that go beyond reasonable expectations, speak up. They should be changed for something more realistic, or the expectations of the task reduced.
- The chances are, your most effective productivity happens in short bursts. Does that apply to you? If so, really try to notice when your peak effort should happen. To some degree this is irrelevant for teachers due to the enforced nature of the timetable, but all the spaces between are yours to manipulate for your benefit.
- Allocate time to recharge so that your effectiveness is heightened on your return to work. Move around, eat and drink something, talk to someone, go outside, do some stretches – whatever works for you.
- Divide tasks up if they are too unwieldy for the time available. This way you will at least make a start and reduce the magnitude of what needs to be done.
- Limit your choices where possible on tasks that do not require a definitive response.
- If procrastination is affecting your completion of a task, do something else that will grab your attention. There is no point persevering with a task that does not have your attention unless absolutely vital.
- Aim to complete one task at a time. Not always possible as a teacher, but research does seem to suggest that is best. Divided attention can lead to tension.

PARETO PRINCIPLE

The Pareto principle, also known as the 80/20 rule, holds that for much of what we do roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. In other words, for a significant amount of our days, we are not that productive! So if we get 80% of our results from 20% of our effort, why not be strategic about our task list to make sure that we prioritise the effort that brings about more effect, at a time of the day when we are most productive? Only you can determine the details!

TRY THIS NOW...

Plan a day based on the Pareto principle. Reflect on how easy it was to organise, how it felt to work through that day, whether it released time for you, whether you would try it again, what changes you would make.

BEING 'GOOD ENOUGH'

Being inspired by stress so that we really make it work for us is in part dependent on our ability to know when to stop working on something because we have done enough for what is required. Many teachers go above and beyond the call of duty, and that is excellent if they are not *obliged* to and it does not adversely affect their wellbeing. But for most of the time, good enough really is good enough. (With apologies to D.W. Winnicott.)

We can make this idea work for us when life is overloaded if we banish all ideas of perfectionism (see page 54). If there is an expectation of delivering more than is realistic, conversations need to be had.

'Good enough' can work really well and help us to manage overloaded schedules, but it is worth being aware that it *can* be a source of stress in itself. If the demands placed on us are such that we end up feeling everything we do could be better, we may find wellbeing at work suffers. Again, if this resonates with you, it is time to talk about workload (see Chapter 5).

SAYING 'NO'

Great communication is a key tactic in the quest to control stress. We cannot survive in a profession with such loose workload boundaries unless we are proficient at saying 'no'. You probably notice that you have some colleagues who have a natural skill when it comes to refusing tasks, while others agree to everything and worry later about how to fit it all in. No guesses for who is the least stressed between the two!

Saying 'no' does not need to be confrontational. Neither does it need inordinately long explanations. If you are already operating at optimum levels, then simply absorbing all new tasks that come your way would certainly adversely impact your wellbeing and balance. You need to maintain your positive stress without straying into overload. These ideas may help:

- If a task is not your job, say no. If you take on the work of others, you will not be able to complete your own work to the best of your ability.
- If a task is not a job you want to work towards doing in the future, say no. It can be hugely beneficial to take on tasks that offer the opportunity to learn a new role or prepare for a promotion *if* time allows. This may sound ruthless, but if the additional task you are being asked to do offers no such benefits, it is best not to take it on.

- If you see no beneficial value to the task, for either you as a teacher or the pupils you teach, say no. Or at least, raise your concerns. It would be wise to discuss your thoughts with whoever is handing down the task, but if there is no benefit to it, common sense dictates it should go.
- If you have philosophical objections to the task, say no. Obviously this needs clarification, but your reasons should be heard.

SAVE IT FOR LATER...

Brush up on assertiveness skills if you feel you need some help making yourself heard or expressing yourself. The Mayo Clinic website offers extensive advice on a wide range of symptoms and conditions as well as healthy lifestyles. The advice there on developing assertiveness is a great place to start: www.mayoclinic.org.

TAKING TIME OUT

However skilled we are at seeking to make stress work for us, there may come a time when time out is the only way ahead. When the pressures of the job tip the balance and become a negative experience, and when biological and psychological symptoms cause us distress, we have to listen and to stop. Taking time out sooner rather than later is invariably the wise response.

If the leave you take becomes extended you will need to see your GP and may want to ask for advice from your union or the Education Support Partnership. These people and organisations are here to help you so use their skills and expertise. You do not have to feel alone.

FACING UP

There may be times in our careers when, despite making the most of things, doing what we can to improve the way we feel, seeking to make stress work for us, and taking what steps we can to manage workload, we would be better off with a change.

Facing up to the need for change can be incredibly liberating. There is no prize for longevity at a particular school if the culture and ethos simply does not work for you. While the temptation is often to leave the profession altogether, it is definitely worth considering changing school initially. Schools vary so much in the

opportunities for wellbeing that they afford their staff members. It could be that the perfect school is out there for you, and you can reset your career in a more supportive environment.

It may be, however, that it really is time to move on to something else entirely. That is not an easy decision to make, and only you can make it, but no decision needs to be permanent. There is always the possibility of a return to teaching in a more appropriate school if that suits you, and the experience you gain in the interim is bound to serve you well.

If a permanent move from teaching is for you, just take a moment to identify some of the key skills and expertise you developed at the chalkface. No experience is ever wasted! Let the situation you find yourself in now be the impetus for the change you need. Stress *can* work for the good.

CASE STUDY...

I'm not a natural at deadlines. I tend to do things at the last minute because I *have* to do them. In a career like teaching that can be really stressful for me and for others relying on me. So I create false deadlines ahead of the true deadline. It works for me! I have also tried to make sure that I cram as much as possible into the hours before the pupils arrive in the morning. It means getting into school quite early, but that is when I work best. I have tried cramming loads into my evenings but it just does not work for me. It makes sense to work to my strengths!

WRITING IT OUT...

A writing prompt to explore your ideal work situation

Imagine you are in your perfect working environment. Where are you working? What role do you have? How pressured do you feel? How much do you enjoy your work? Now consider the differences between your ideal working environment and where you find yourself now. Is change indicated? Can you make those changes in your current employment?

TAKE 5...

- Stress can kill. We can make it work for us if our circumstances allow that, but we should never underestimate how serious negative stress and the inevitable impact on wellbeing can be.

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- The way we allocate time is crucial in safeguarding our wellbeing. We should aim to be wise about working when we are more energised.
- Perfection is impossible, so 'good enough' is fine.
- Take time out if necessary. You may save your teaching career or decide that another direction would benefit you right now. Either way, your wellbeing must come first. We are so much more than our job titles.
- If it has not been possible to make the stress you feel in your job work for you, it may be time to move on, either to a different school or out of the profession altogether.