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## What principals can do to lessen the effects of stress on teachers

Randall Gene Otto  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## What principals can do to lessen the effects of stress on teachers

### Abstract

Stress can affect anyone in any occupation. In this paper, discussion on the effects of stress will be narrowed to only one profession, teaching. The researcher will report the literature as to the definition of what stress is, its symptoms, discuss ways to measure its frequency, look at the causes of stress within the teaching profession, and finally present ways that principals and other administrators can lessen the effects of stress. A generic definition of stress was offered by Bertlinsen (cited in Parson, 1987) when he stated that stress was a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed on it. Kyriacou (1987) offered a definition for the teaching profession that says that stress occurs when teachers are subjected to unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, or anxiety, resulting from the work of being teachers. Kyriacou (1987) also delivered a definition of burnout. He defined burnout as a syndrome resulting from prolonged stress. Burnout can be viewed as an end-product of stress.

WHAT PRINCIPALS CAN DO TO LESSEN THE  
EFFECTS OF STRESS ON TEACHERS

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Randall Gene Otto  
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Robert H. Decker

Nov. 2, 1989

Date Approved

[Signature]

Advisor/Director of  
Research Paper

Norman McCumsey

10/3/1989

Date Approved

[Signature]  
Second Reader of Research  
Paper

Dale R. Jackson

11/3/89

Date Received

[Signature]  
Head, Department of  
Educational Administration  
and Counseling

Stress can affect anyone in any occupation. In this paper, discussion on the effects of stress will be narrowed to only one profession, teaching. The researcher will report the literature as to the definition of what stress is, its symptoms, discuss ways to measure its frequency, look at the causes of stress within the teaching profession, and finally present ways that principals and other administrators can lessen the effects of stress.

A generic definition of stress was offered by Bertinusen (cited in Parson, 1987) when he stated that stress was a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed on it. Kyriacou (1987) offered a definition for the teaching profession that says that stress occurs when teachers are subjected to unpleasant emotions, such as tension, frustration, or anxiety, resulting from the work of being teachers. Kyriacou (1987) also delivered a definition of burnout. He defined burnout as a syndrome resulting from prolonged stress. Burnout can be viewed as an end-product of stress.

Why is the study of stress so important to the teaching profession? For one thing, Schnacke, Martray, and Adams (1982) reported that teaching was one of the three most stressful occupations in America, along with being an air traffic controller or a surgeon. When does stress appear in most teachers? Schnacke and his colleagues reported that most teachers feel the prevalent effects of stress between the ages of 27 and 39. Stress then was something that was usually diagnosed after years of experience and does not just happen to new members or oldtimers in the profession.

The acquisition of stress may be a methodical process. Friesen (1986) described this acquisition as a cycle. First, comes the presence of some type of stressor. Second, the person must decide on the resources that are necessary to meet the stressor. Third, the individual's response comes. It is manifested in some form of stress. Lastly, is the individual's response to the stress. Dunham (1984) also defined this process, but described it in terms of the feelings that are acquired during a period of stress. Frustration

was usually the first emotion felt, followed by anxiety, exhaustion, and finally burnout.

Within teaching staffs, stress must be dealt with by principals and other administrators. Too many good members of the profession are being lost because of its effects. Rottler (1983) reported that many individuals do not consider teaching enjoyable any longer. The lack of job satisfaction was driving educators into other careers. The study of stress was also important because of its possible lasting effects on those teachers who stayed in the profession. Anxieties in certain situations tended to decrease teachers' effectiveness and had a negative influence on the performance of the students (Youngs, 1978).

### Symptoms of Stress

Now that stress has been defined, the warning signs need to be examined. The warning signs of stress can be divided into three main groups, each representing a different level of stress acquisition.

The first group of symptoms was what Eskridge and Coker (1985) termed as minor symptoms. This group included fatigue, headaches, insomnia, and a

slight possibility of weight loss. These symptoms usually tended to disappear once the stressful situation had been dealt with and was no longer present.

A second group of symptoms, according to Eskridge and Coker (1985), were characterized by behavioral manifestations associated with stress. Teachers within this group became prone to quick mood changes. They also seemed irritable and showed signs of paranoia and depression. Also, they had a tendency to take more unnecessary risks than usual. Eskridge and Coker (1985) identified that these symptoms usually took longer to disappear and quite possibly could have long-term effects on the individual.

The final group of symptoms associated with stress were termed by Stapleton (1987) as visceral or physical signs. These symptoms included the diagnosis of hypertension in an individual, or the development of ulcers, or colitis. Similar to the previous group of symptoms dealing with behavioral changes, this group of symptoms may disappear in time, or may become a permanent problem for the individual.



### Stress Inventories

Extensive research has been conducted on effects of stress on the teaching profession. Most of this research did not deal with symptoms that became noticeable once stress had been obtained. The research dealt with different amounts and types of stress.

Maslach (1981) developed one of the first inventories to ascertain the effects of stress. This "Burnout Inventory" consisted of twenty-two items which were divided into three categories: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. Each item was rated on a scale of zero to six, according to the frequency of its presence. Each item was also rated on a scale of zero to seven, according to the intensity of the item.

A second inventory, "The Teaching Events Stress Inventory," dealt with the situations or events that may manifest themselves into stressful conditions within members of the teaching profession. This inventory developed by Wilson (cited in Beasley, 1984) rates the

magnitude and frequency of fifteen events. These events have been divided into topics dealing with Management, Interpersonal Relationships, Technical Tasks, and Personal Security.

A different type of stress inventory dealt with not only the factors which caused stress within teachers, but also asked individuals to reveal the approaches that they used to deal with these factors. Developed by Blase (1986), the "Teacher Stress Inventory" also delved into individual feelings that accompany the stressful events. Each participant was asked to relate any approaches that were used to deal with their feelings.

#### Causes of Stress Within the Teaching Profession

Previously described stress inventories showed an extensive amount of time had been spent in order to identify the causes of stress within the teaching profession. These causes were numerous and their effect on teachers were as different as the teachers themselves. Most causes of stress were distributed among three major categories. The first category dealt with the intrapersonal causes of teacher stress. A second

category dealt with the interpersonal causes. Finally, the teaching environment was looked at as a separate source of stress.

Intrapersonal causes of stress within teachers occurred when anxieties or frustrations were developed within teachers. These anxieties were the result of basic character flaws within the individual or the individual's own feelings of inadequacy to control situations around him/her.

Sometimes stress developed because the individual felt there was little or no chance of advancement within the school (Schlansker, 1987 and Rottler, 1983). Not only were the hopes for advancement minute, but the teacher may have been denied a promotion he/she felt they deserved. Teachers who were denied the right to move from one building assignment to another may have developed anxiety over the situation.

The increased responsibilities that some teachers were burdened with may have been a cause of internal stress (Youngs, 1978). The addition of extracurricular duties, study hall supervision, committee work, and other types of duties have put a tremendous strain on the time of many teachers. In addition to the increased responsibilities

causing stress within teaching staffs, duties or roles that were ambiguous in the minds of the teachers have caused unnecessary anxieties (Dunham, 1984).

Other causes of stress that were usually manifested within the individual were feelings of being unqualified or feeling one has little authority over the events that go on around oneself (Stapleton, 1987). Feelings of being unqualified sometimes arose when teachers were forced to do jobs for which they were not trained. These feelings arose from trying to do a job one cannot possibly accomplish. Teachers who felt that they could not control a situation developed similar anxieties.

Sometimes individual characteristics or behaviors induced feelings of uneasiness. One of these characteristics or behaviors that past studies (Harris, Halpin & Halpin, 1985 and Albertson & Kagan, 1987) reported as a possible producer of stress for certain teachers was the tendency to be too authoritative. Individuals who insisted that things be done their way and only their way tended to get "uptight" easily when

someone "rocked their boat." Other characteristics that tended to increase levels of stress were perfectionism and having a poor self-image (Rottler, 1983).

Interpersonal relationships have also been shown to be a major cause of stress within the teaching profession. The relationships between teachers and supervisors seemed to cause more feelings of anxiety than any other school-related relationship. Administrators who were perceived to be non-supportive of the actions of their teachers tended to be subjected to more feelings of resentment than those who were supportive (Eskridge and Coker, 1985). Other characteristics of supervisors that teachers viewed as unfavorable were being too critical, lacking empathy towards teachers, and showing favoritism towards only some members of the faculty (Blase, 1984). Stress-related feelings were sometimes transmitted towards supervisors because of actions the supervisors may or may not have had any control over. For example, when teachers were involuntarily transferred it is usually because

of a district's decision. However, feelings of anxiety may have been inadvertently turned towards the supervisor (Schlansker, 1987).

A second intrapersonal relationship that teachers found to be a cause of stress was the one associated with the teacher-student relationship. Teachers who used an inordinate amount of time on disciplining their students tended to be more stressful (Eskridge and Coker, 1985). Kyriacou (1987) reported that students who exhibited poor attitudes towards their teachers, and to school in general, promoted stressful situations. Finally, Sarros (1986) identified that some teachers became overanxious just because of the constant day-to-day interactions they have with their students.

Albertson & Kagan (1987) and Rottler (1983) reported that relationships between teachers also may be a promoter of stress. Many teachers tended to defend their particular areas of expertise from the attack of others who question the necessity of that area. Teaching staffs were made up of individuals with different personalities. Disagreements often arose because of those differences.

Finally, interpersonal conflicts occurred between teachers and parents or other members of the community. Sarros (1986) concluded that the different demands that were placed on teachers by these people could do nothing else than to promote feelings of inadequacy on the teacher's behalf. It seemed that students would often end up similar to their parents. A problem that a parent may have will often show itself eventually in the student. Parents were also notorious for defending their children against the school. It did not make any difference if the child was in the wrong, the parent often supported the child.

The ability to deal with problems with oneself and with others has been found to be a cause of stress within teachers, but a teacher's ability to deal with the school environment also caused problems.

One factor that tended to elicit feelings of anxiety in teachers was the lack of time for breaks or for preparation during the school day (Calabrese, 1987). This lack of adequate time was directly related to the fact that some teachers

felt that they had too heavy of a workload (Kyriacou, 1987). Other factors within the school that were considered to be stressors were overcrowding (Schlansker, 1987) and lack of proper teaching materials (Calabrese, 1987).

### What Principals Can Do to Alleviate Stress

The causes of stress within teaching staffs were clues to the principal and other administrators on how to alleviate or lessen the effects of the problem. The ways to control stress were numerous according to past research. In general, the methods used to control stress were grouped into three main categories.

First, principals and other administrators improved the relationships they had with the faculty by showing more visible signs of support. Second, certain management policies were altered or adopted within the school. Lastly, the climate of the school was important in creating an atmosphere that was worry-free.

Principals provided support to their teaching staffs in a variety of ways. One way was to develop a support system for the staff which was made up of either administrators or teachers, or a combination of the two (Frey & Young, 1983 and



Bailey, 1983). Any problems, concerns, or questions that arose were answered through these support groups. The best support group identified was one made up of teachers' peers. Most individuals felt comfortable discussing their problems with their peers rather than with supervisors. These support groups also were used to provide counseling for the teachers (Pajak, Williams, and Glickman, 1987). In addition, McMillon (1988) believed support groups helped teachers express feelings better and thus adapt to situations better.

Principals also lessen the effects of stress by supplying their staffs with positive feedback whenever possible (Calabrese, 1987). Another study by Calabrese (1987) revealed that principals helped reduce the role conflicts of some teachers. Elmian (1986) concluded that supervisors also eased tension in their staffs by being supportive in clarifying educational values and making sure that teachers set realistic goals.

Finally, principals and other administrators showed a belief in the professionalism of their staffs by allowing teachers to provide input into the decision-making process (Frey & Young, 1983

and Schlansker, 1987). Teachers, as well as other individuals, felt a greater sense of responsibility for the actions of the school, if they had been given a chance to provide input.

Besides instituting methods to increase the support of teaching staffs, principals reduced the effects of stress by creating or changing certain policies within their schools. Policies regarding inservices were made more beneficial by using them to help teachers manage stress. Many teachers felt that the majority of current inservices had little or no educational value. Gold (1985) indicated that teachers needed to be made aware of the stressors that affect them. Stapleton (1987) further provided evidence that inservices on thought management, time management, and exercise programs helped reduce the effects of stress.

Changes could be made in existing policies of schools in areas besides inservices. Calabrese (1987) reported that reducing the ambiguity of certain policies helped reduce stress. Specifically, changes in the curriculum were instituted to reduce overlapping and sexism, and thus reduce anxieties that were created in these areas (Kyriacou, 1987 and Calabrese, 1987).

Any policy dealing with how the workload was to be distributed was just as important as the changes identified to relieve stress in teaching staffs. The workload should match the academic and experience background of the person to whom it was being delegated (Eskridge and Coker, 1985).

By increasing the amount of support to a teaching staff and altering certain policies, the principal helped improve the overall climate of a school. Bailey (1983) cited that an improved school climate increases morale, makes the school more achievement oriented, and reduces stress within a teaching staff.

Principals further improved the school climate in other ways. Frey and Young (1983) reported that the use of humor was effective in reducing the effects of stress. Eskridge and Coker (1985) indicated that principals should also try to steer clear of, and possibly change, staff members who always seem to have a negative attitude. Abbey and Esposito (1985) reported that using expert and referent power within a school was more effective in creating a positive climate than using coercive power.

### Conclusion

Stress has and will continue to be an unwanted companion for individuals in certain situations within today's changing society. Everyone, no matter how young or old, eventually feels the symptoms associated with the onset of stress. These symptoms may last a short or long time. They may manifest themselves into physical problems that are carried with them the rest of their lives.

Research has provided us with different ways to diagnose the presence and the magnitude of stress. Stress inventories, such as Blase's (1986) and Maslach's (1981), have been designed to specify the stressors that face only the teaching profession. It should be up to principals and other administrators to use these inventories to determine the causes of stress within their teaching staffs. This must be done in order to keep the level of performance of the teachers high.

Stress inventories tended to define the causes of stress within the profession. These causes can be grouped into three main categories. First were those items that affect the individual

from within or intrapersonally. Second were the stressors that came about because of the interpersonal relationships that existed within the school community. Finally, the environment within a school was a source of stressful situations to teachers.

Principals and other administrators must begin to take a long look at the causes of stress within their own staffs. If for no other reason, it is important for education to hold onto its valuable members and not lose them to other careers. The effects of stress can be minimized by principals in one of three ways or by any combination. The support given to a teaching staff through the development of a positive rapport was one such method. Ambiguous or unnecessary policies within the school should be dealt with as well. Finally, the climate within the school should be nurtured in a positive manner to help alleviate anxieties within teachers.

It is up to principals and other administrators to help teachers handle the effects of stress before burnout occurs. Also, by limiting the effects of stressors, a principal

will help enable teachers to be as effective as possible in their job. This will do wonders for the effectiveness of the school and the performance of the students.

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