Looking After Yourself: Teacher Wellness
Wellness and the Early Career Teacher

As you develop your personal wellness plan, reflect on these questions:

• What are the significant changes to my identity that this new job has brought to my life?

• In what ways has my new job affected my support network? What familiar support systems are missing? How might I create new support systems?

• What aspects of my environment feel completely new for me? In what ways does this environment feel familiar?

• What are some of the significant changes in my life as I begin my new career?

• How might I better understand the stress that I feel? What do I need to know about stress?

• What are some of the things I can do to prevent feeling overwhelmed?

Taking Care of Yourself

Wellness is often something we consider when we get sick or face a crisis. Then we can hardly wait until we are well again. Our wellness depends on our lifestyle and not only how we cope with the physical demands we put on ourselves, but also the emotional demands.

First-year teachers are going through a transition from being a student to being a professional teacher. Transitional phases are sometimes difficult and painful. You may be away from family and long-time friends for the first time. There may be an awareness that your expectations and what you are able to do are different. You may also be overwhelmed with your workload and, therefore, work late into the night, on weekends, and at lunch and recess, to the point where your own personal wellness begins to suffer.

The first years of teaching are filled with high expectations, excitement, anticipation and lots of change! You are facing a challenge that all first-year teachers face — striking a balance. The balance is between:
Personal Life and Work Life
Your work can consume you. There is so much to do and learn. Personal life often suffers in the first year of teaching. Exercise is forgotten and there is no time to meet new friends, let alone join them for activities outside of school. Taking time to relax every day and exercise both relieves stress and makes your transition easier. It keeps you healthy. Exercise and meeting friends will maintain your energy levels.

Emotional Life and Professional Life
It’s okay to be emotional. You may have a variety of emotions and it’s important to stay “connected” or “present” with what’s really going on. Experience it fully and act accordingly. Everyone had a first year. Laugh at yourself and enjoy your talents even when others do not. Recognize your emotions. You can express them appropriately rather than at times when “they just come out”. You will need to decide if you can live with the difference between your dream of what teaching would be and your discovery of what it really is. Will a career in teaching meet your intellectual and emotional needs?

Perfectionism and Surviving
To have the perfect lesson and the perfect class where all students are working up to their potential all the time is impossible. Realize that there are students in your classroom with so many personal and home problems that no matter how your lessons are planned or what you do, they are not going to do any work. Do not take this personally. It does not mean you are not being a good teacher. Look for the help of more experienced teachers and your principal when you need their support or ideas.

A teacher needs to contain the demands and set priorities. It takes too much energy to be perfect all the time. No one else expects a first-year teacher to be perfect. Survival of the first year depends on letting go of thinking you have to be able to do it all, all of the time.

Asking for Help and Doing It All Yourself
You are a trained teacher with new ideas and information. Situations or concerns may come up that you do not know how to handle. Ask others and ask early. It is not a sign of incompetence to ask questions. Other people have experience in areas that we may not have. Asking early may save a lot of grief and a lot of time. Ask for support. Be honest about how it hurts or how excited you are about your new project.

Helping Others and Helping Yourself
Are you someone who is always there to help others even if it takes time away from what you want or need to do? There is nothing wrong with helping others unless it is to your detriment. This sets up resentment and eventually leads to problems in relationships. If you worry about everyone else’s needs, you will not have any time to meet your own needs.

Saying Yes and Saying No
It is all right to say no to too many extracurricular activities or assignments. First-year teachers often think they have to do everything that is asked of them and do it well. There are just so many hours in a day and you have just so much energy. If it is too much for you, say so. It does not help anyone for you to be so stretched that you either cannot do anything well or you are not getting the sleep you need.

Our tendency is to direct stress management toward the symptoms rather than make changes in the source. If you are having symptoms of too much stress, look at where you are out of balance. If you cannot figure out how to get in balance, get support from friends and staff members. Know who your local NBTA counsellor is and feel free to call the NBTA Counselling Services. Remember next year to reach out to first-year teachers.
Recognizing Symptoms of Stress

Some researchers describe stress-related symptoms by using categories or stages. “Stage One” symptoms are common to most people, and usually don’t indicate a cause for concern. “Stage Three” symptoms, on the other hand, indicate a need for professional intervention in stress management.

Stage One
- you eat and drink very quickly, often “on the fly”.
- you feel under pressure for time.
- you feel as though you are being driven.

Stage Two
- you experience an alteration in sleep patterns, often waking after several hours of sleep.
- you may become increasingly irritable.
- your memory may fail.
- you react very strongly to difficulties.
- you develop physical symptoms including indigestion and headache.
- you may feel anxious or depressed.

Stage Three
- you may feel faint.
- you develop more physical symptoms, possibly including chest pain.
- you have difficulty making decisions.
- you catch every “bug” that is going around.
- you experience loss of memory and find it difficult to concentrate.
- you find it difficult to experience laughter, joy and excitement.
- you feel tearful frequently.

(Adopted from Dunham, 1992)

Thinking about your stress . . .

Beginning teachers might respond stressfully to these situations:
- personal or family difficulties
- unrealistic expectations of performance
- evaluation by an administrator
- classroom management
- loneliness or isolation
- time pressures
- communication with parents
- difficult colleagues
- planning for students with exceptional needs.

Consider writing about some of the situations that make you feel stressful . . .

Some Rules of Stress Management
1. Learn how stress affects you. Understand the symptoms of stress as you feel them.
2. Visualize your stress as a state of imbalance or as a kind of contest or game.
3. Decide who the opposition is and what your worries/challenges really are.
4. Reduce the “opponent’s” strength as much as possible. For example, are there tasks that you need to excuse yourself from? Can you enlist support to strengthen your “team”?
5. Increase your strength physically, emotionally.
6. Lighten the backpack of negative emotions.
7. Make use of all available resources. Take advantage of your support systems (family, spouse, friends, and colleagues).
8. Guarantee yourself some “time-outs” when they will be most helpful.
9. Use the physical symptoms of stress as a gauge to determine if the strategies that you are using are effective.
10. Create a personalized wellness plan that involves commitments to fun, relaxation and exercise. Consider ways to incorporate social opportunities into your plan.

(Adapted from Rainham, 1997)

Stress might mean ...
- exhaustion
- conflict
- pressure
- powerlessness
- anger
- nervousness
- anxiety
- withdrawal
Looking After Yourself: Teacher Wellness

Stress and gender . . .

Women and men may respond differently to stressful situations. Men may feel expectations to “fix” problems, to be invulnerable, to be “successful” and financially independent. They may also feel that it is important that they appear to have all emotions “under control”. Women may feel responsible for the emotional reactions of colleagues, students, and family, and tend to feel that something that has gone poorly is “their fault”. Many women find it difficult to separate their responsibilities at school from their responsibilities at home and for relationships.

(Adapted from Rainham, 1997)

“No one told me that other beginners had these problems. I was planning to quit because I thought that I was a bad teacher.” – Brock and Grady, 1997, p. 13

Points to Ponder:

• Set boundaries and learn to say no.
• Prioritize your time and get organized.
• Take care of yourself — follow a proper diet and exercise regularly. Find a friend or companion who will accompany you on walks or in a game of basketball in the school gym.
• Check your lifestyle habits — strike a balance between being a workaholic and a slacker.
• Challenge your teaching philosophy and your belief system — these should constantly be evolving.
• Take breaks, even short ones, throughout the day. Aim for maximum pleasure from a five or ten-minute break. Go outside during your lunch break for a quick walk.
• Take time to do what you like to do best once you get home.
• Use relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, diaphragmatic breathing, listening to music, aerobics, visualization techniques, etc. In a stressful moment, visualizing a sanctuary or secure place can be calming.
• Laugh a lot.
• Simplify your life — organize your home and work spaces. Make do with less.
• Talk to someone when you feel stress - a colleague, friend, family member, someone from the NBTA’s counselling service, or even a pet. Learn to accept and trust the support from these people.
• Learn to use a journal and write your story. Talk things out on paper several times a week.
• Look for social and intellectual diversity. Look for opportunities to make friends with non-teachers. Create or develop interests in areas that aren’t connected directly with teaching.
• Look for opportunities to be childlike (not childishly!) by participating in playful activities. Perhaps staff meeting days could become “ugly tie” days. Read the comics and your horoscope instead of the business section. Buy yourself that candy you used to eat when you were a teenager. Make faces in the mirror. Use your imagination. Color. Daydream.
• Learn to laugh at yourself. When you trip and end up with one foot in the wastebasket or teach a whole class with your zipper down, make up a witty response. Students will appreciate that you have a sense of humour about yourself.
• Be sure to get enough sleep. Nothing contributes to a rough day like exhaustion or illness.
• Make and maintain a prioritized “to do” list and...
a calendar/planner. Carry them with you at all times. Plan the work and work the plan!

- Aim for realistic goals. Don’t expect your performance to be as skilled as your experienced colleagues. Try not to compare yourself to other teachers. Just do the best you can. Every teacher has his or her own personal strengths.

- Try to leave your personal stresses at home and your work stresses at school.

- Consider the landscape of your classroom. Try to create an atmosphere that is comfortable for you as well as for your students. Many teachers enjoy having music available to listen to during work times before and after school. Sometimes adding a collection of photographs or mementoes can make your workspace feel more welcoming. Plants, cushions, or your favourite lamp can all contribute to a warmer work environment for you.

- Start a file to collect notes of encouragement and thanks that you receive from parents and colleagues. Include any records of your successes and then read them when times get rough.

Now feel free to add some points of your own:

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“\textbf{The Greeks had a saying that a man will remain young just as long as he (sic) plays. The spirit of the play is the spirit of childhood. The teacher who has forgotten how to play seems old in spirit and is so thoroughly out of sympathy with the child life that she (sic) cannot speak the language in which the child is thinking and acting.}”

- Curtis, 1918, p. 9

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**How can I better understand the stress that I feel?**

Teachers sometimes use the word “stress” to describe a variety of feelings or situations. It is helpful to think of stress as a kind of contest: in other words, stress results when you are facing an issue or challenge that seems to be greater or more powerful than you are. If you think of stress as a contest or imbalance, then you can look for new attitudes or behaviours that can help you regain the balance.

Sometimes challenges or issues make us feel strong and capable, and so they don’t tend to feel stressful.

**What are some of the things that I can do to prevent feeling overwhelmed?**

Your response to the changes that you are experiencing can significantly influence the texture of your first years of teaching. If you are careful to understand and respond to your own needs as well as to the needs of your students, you will feel greater satisfaction with these early years. Planning for your own needs can take the form of a “wellness plan” that deliberately incorporates exercise, social interactions and pleasure into your life.

As you create your wellness plan, you may find the following sections helpful. Consider how you might incorporate the self-care checklist, the rules of stress management, and the tips on handling stress into your plan.

**When I arrived at my new school, my extracurricular activities were already picked out for me. I’m worried about being able to keep up with teaching and carrying out my extracurricular tasks. What should I do?**

Sometimes extracurricular planning takes place before a new teacher arrives, and some teachers may have their activities designated for them. If this is the case for you, and you are uncomfortable with the assignment that has been set up, be sure to speak to your principal about your concerns. Helping you establish your classroom skills should be every principal’s priority; be sure that you have the time you need to accomplish that. Remember
that extracurricular activities are voluntary in nature, but they add a rich dimension to students’ lives. Working with students in clubs and sports allows you to establish relationships that enrich your classroom interactions. Try to negotiate an arrangement that meets your needs.

I’m feeling swamped and kind of out of control, but I’m afraid to talk to anyone about it. What should I do?

There are times when all teachers feel swamped and out of control. To some extent, this is hard to avoid. As a beginner, however, you may feel more stressed than an experienced teacher. Go back to the section on wellness and reflect on how you might plan to manage the pressing tasks one at a time. Ask colleagues to help you through a rough week. It is very important to remember that all beginning teachers have “swamped” times; this is typical, and it will get better.

Resources to Remember

Use resources from the NBTA library.


  This handbook contains information on time management strategies such as avoiding over-commitment, dealing with procrastination, eliminating time-wasters and creative problem solving.


  “This book is for teachers who have good days and bad ... it is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts, because they love learners, learning and the teaching life” (Palmer, 1998)

• **Calvin and Hobbes: The Days are Just Packed**. Gary Watterson, Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1996.

  Any volume of Calvin and Hobbes’ adventures are sure to present school life in a way that can lighten your spirit and help to put things into a new perspective.


  This book contains discussions that help people understand the nature of stress. Most of the resource is committed to learning strategies, techniques and skills that will assist in minimizing personal stress and its physical manifestations.

**Breathing for Relaxation**

• as you inhale, let your stomach swell out, then let it sink down as you exhale. Imagine your stomach as a balloon that inflates as you inhale.

• on the exhale, see if you can let all the air out and allow your chest to sag downward. This may help your neck and shoulder muscles to relax.

• practise breathing slowly, smoothly and regularly. The smoothness and regularity of breathing can be more beneficial than breathing deeply.

• imagine waves or another rhythmical image and match your breathing to that image. Focus on letting the breath out slowly and completely.

• counting as you breathe may help you to keep a regular, rhythmic pattern. You may want to inhale to a slow count of four, hold your breath for two, and exhale for a slow count of four.

  (Adapted from Rainham, 1997)
How to Stay in Teaching (When You Really Feel Like Crying)

Exhaustion and frustration threaten many teachers’ careers. One veteran teacher shares seven lessons for renewal.

According to statisticians, on the first day of my eighth year of teaching, I substantially increased my odds of remaining in the ranks for a lifetime – or until age 62, whichever comes first. It is the second major cut I’ve survived, because many new teachers leave the profession after their first year. However, there are seven lessons I wish that I had learned earlier.

Lesson One: Get a Massage
My first and most lasting complaint about teaching is that the high school schedule does not allow enough time for reflection. These are not the halls of academia. Ivy doesn’t have time to grow on the U.S. high school – perhaps because it simply can’t find something standing still long enough on which to attach. Society’s penchant for moving ever faster is mirrored here. We all seem to have forgotten that slowness is natural: Witness the earth turning on its axis, the progression from birth to retirement, the time it takes a student to walk from locker to class.

Teaching beats on both body and soul in ways that most people do not fathom. Our day involves incessant standing, walking, squatting, and kneeling. Students may feel bored and idle; educators are anything but. Consider also the emotional exhaustion that comes from comforting kids in trouble, kids with trigger tempers, and parents without hope. Consider the effort it takes to create out of whole cloth a lesson that will meet the needs and desires of everyone – students, parents, administrators, national critics. It is no wonder that we need the adult’s equivalent of pulling out the nap rug: massage.

Massage (or meditation or yoga) is a necessity in the act of self-centering. Anger and frustration dissolve, focus returns, and the world slows down.

And, in a profession as isolating as teaching, where adult contact is far too infrequent, one cannot underestimate the value of the “laying on of hands.”

Lesson Two: Exercise
Education is a physically demanding profession. A strong will and a strong intellect are not enough; we need a strong body to support them.

For most of my teaching life I have exercised in spurts. Engaging in constant afternoon napping one week and running 25 miles the next have not been uncommon for me – nor has hitting the couch again the week after that.

Just recently I have figured out the obvious lesson that doing a little exercise consistently is better for the body and spirit than going whole hog twice a year. My dog Moses and I are currently enjoying our best running streak ever – and we owe it all to refusing to go farther than two miles, three times a week for at least the first month. And I’ve had nary a sick day since the streak began.

Do what you can – just do it regularly.
Lesson Three: Get a Dog (and some perspective)

OK – it doesn’t have to be a dog. It could be a child, a llama, a horse – anything that depends upon your daily, undivided attention to thrive.

My husband and I have had a 20-pound tiger cat for five years, but since Ty never seemed to mind what time I got home, I routinely stayed at school for evening meetings. Our dog Moses, though, is a 3-year-old yellow Labrador who lives for the moment when “Mommy’s home!”

Initially, his presence required some adjustment: How can I prepare a discussion on The Grapes of Wrath when he pulls my pant leg? How can I grade this paper when he whines to play? How can I have a life for myself if I can’t even find time to play with him? The progression from question to question was quite natural and surprisingly quick.

A very wise colleague once observed that teaching is like housework: It fills all the time you allow it to fill. If you do not place some limits on how many rooms you clean, you quickly find yourself scrubbing everything from attic to basement. And others will soon come to expect that you’ll continually “add on” to your list of chores.

Plants can be replaced (or least in my house); cats can get by on their own; but as a character in The Truth About Cats and Dogs points out, dogs do not relish time alone. They do not look forward to long, quiet afternoons with a good book. They need people. They give their people’s lives perspective.

Lesson Four: People Who Say “I wish I’d gone into teaching” rarely mean it

They usually just blurt out this line sometime in July or over Veteran’s Day weekend. I have heard hundreds of folks — from close friends to complete strangers — utter that thought. Why? Sometimes, they sense the great satisfaction that comes from having taught, having changed someone. More often, they have no clue how much time the job entails. A colleague of mine and his wife, an elementary school teacher, calculated their “ overtime” one year. Actual vacation time: two weeks.

Most people don’t buy that though, so I try this response: “It is a wonderful profession. You should enter it. In fact, there’s a great teacher education program at the university right here in town — you can matriculate as a part-timer and get certified.”

If you can’t beat ‘em, ask them to join you.

Lesson Five: Don’t Expect Outsiders to Understand

It’s important to note from the outset that “outsiders” are not just the always-vote-no-any-budget-prop neighbours we’ve all met. Numbered in this unexclusive club may be your family, school board members, administrators, and even teachers from other departments.

All teachers do not have the same job. The maxim that a good teacher can teach anything may be true, but it does not mean that all assignments make equal demands on teachers. Surround yourself with other people who recognize that an English teacher has tremendous amounts of reading and writing to do, that an unappreciated quantity of preparation goes into a chemistry lab, that teaching 30 sixth graders to navigate a pommel horse is no easy bargain.

Every person who has ever taught anywhere feels qualified to comment on how the business of educating ought to be done. Most are wrong. When they inevitably say something inane, share it with a colleague. Laugh at them. Suggest that they do student teaching in your area. Do what you can to show them the light, but don’t let them keep you from the people you’re really supposed to teach: the kids.
Lesson Six: Realize that the Average Building has More Than One Faculty Member for a Reason

One December, exhausted, fried, under-appreciated and ready to quit, I sought the advice of our district’s most beloved and influential teacher. He told me many things that day, but the most memorable was that a single teacher cannot expect herself/himself to reach all the children in the building — or even all the students on her class roster.

“You reach Judy,” he said to me, “and I reach Sam, and Jane reaches James, and among all of us, hopefully, we get every kid.”

Most administrators won’t tell you this, but it’s true. If it truly takes a whole village to raise a single child, why expect yourself to be the saving grace for 150?

Lesson Seven: Vacation Means Vacate

Recharge. Recharge. Recharge. Teachers rely so much on vacations as opportunities to get caught up that when the vacations finally arrive, teachers become mired in guilt for what they are unable to get done. Go to the copy room Monday morning after a week’s break and you’ll hear a common refrain: “Last night was just like the first day of school all over again, filled with nightmares. Am I prepared? Will it go OK?”

So many opportunities and distractions fill our breaks — the house that hasn’t been properly cleaned in months, the books that you’ve been pushing aside, the body that really needs to rest, your own children. Don’t set unrealistic expectations for our vacation. Teachers work harder than most of our students (a sad fact but nonetheless true); we need these breaks. Do as much as possible before leaving. Have something prepared for your return (thereby reducing the cold sweat, nightmare syndrome). Then get away and relax. For at least this week, stop trying to turn a flawed educational system into Oxford and Cambridge. You’ll be much more likely to come back and have another crack at it.

Jennifer J. Bradford teaches journalism and 9th grade English at Newark High School in New York. She may be reached at 6 Prospect St., Fairport, NY 14450.

Resources and Links

1. Teacher Wellness website: www.teacherwellness.ca


