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## Teacher Stress: What It Is, Why It's Important, How It Can be Alleviated

*Teacher stress can be conceptualized as an imbalance between risk and protective factors. Stress emanates from risk factors at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. When risk factors exceed protective factors, teacher ability to cope with adversity is*

*inhibited, likely resulting in stress and pernicious consequences. In this paper we draw on empirical evidence as well as our own professional efforts at reducing stress among novice teachers to explain the phenomenon and recommend interventions.*

I'm getting drained of all my energy.  
I'm overeating.  
Everything feels out of control.  
I feel so isolated.

**T**HESE ARE comments by teachers sitting in a focus group conducted by the University of

Miami (UM) School of Education and Human Development (SEHD). The focus group was part of a project for the American Psychological Association (APA) on alleviating stress that teachers experience. The APA project is called *Teacher stress: What it is and what can be done about it* (<http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/activities/teacher-stress.aspx>). Group participants reflect on how it feels to be a teacher today, especially a new teacher.

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Stress, a common complaint in the workplace, is associated with a number of negative personal and professional consequences (Karasek & Thorell, 1990; Roeser et al., 2013; Shirom, Oliver, & Stein, 2009). Teacher stress not only impacts teacher health and job satisfaction negatively, but it also figures prominently in the nation's high teacher attrition rate (McCarthy, Lambert, & Reiser, 2014). Although statistics

vary by region, 30% to 50% of new teachers leave within the first 5 years of entering the career. Within the first 3 years, 20% to 33% of novice teachers leave the profession (Blazer, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Kelley, 2004; Martin, 2008; T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Teacher attrition exacts financial, organizational, and instructional costs (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

In this article, we deal with stress from the perspective of risk and protective factors at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. Stress and well-being are ecological and multidimensional constructs (Prilleltensky et al., 2015; Rath & Harter, 2010). As a result, we pay attention to its multidimensional nature. We make recommendations for coping in the face of adversity in the hope of improving teacher well-being and lowering attrition rates.

### Stress

Stress can be defined as an imbalance between risk and protective factors. This conceptualization facilitates identification of factors that help or hinder a sense of well-being (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006; Rath & Harter, 2010). When risks outweigh protective mechanisms, one's actual or perceived capacity to cope is diminished (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; McCarthy, Lambert, O'Donnell, & Melendres, 2009; Selye, 1975). Stress is reflected in negative feelings, behaviors, and thoughts.

### Risk and Protective Factors

Risk factors are characteristics of the person or the environment that increase chances of a negative outcome for the person or system. Protective factors, on the other hand, are attributes of the person or environment that enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes for the person and the system alike (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & Hasford, 2013). Consequently, any effort to reduce stress must seek to minimize risk factors and increase protective factors at multiple ecological

levels (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). The personal domain relates to dynamics taking place within the person, such as the perceived ability to cope with external stressors (McCarthy et al., 2014). The interpersonal domain pertains to risk and protective factors deriving from interactions with colleagues, superiors, students, family and friends (Hartney, 2008). Finally, the organizational sphere has to do with dynamics taking place within the educational setting of the school or district (Herman & Reinke, 2015; Kelly, 2006).

Table 1 describes some of the risk and protective factors taking place at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels. In the next few sections we elaborate on the research supporting the assertions made in the table.

### Personal Level

Personal and psychological concerns relate to teachers' self-esteem and self-efficacy (McCarthy et al., 2014). One of the most prevalent risk factors, especially for novice teachers, is a sense of isolation. *Anxious, lonely* and *inadequate*, are common feelings among novice teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The school environment offers little opportunity to develop a sense of camaraderie with colleagues to counteract these feelings (Herman & Reinke, 2015; Holmes, 2005; Payne, 2008). This lack of opportunity to share concerns with fellow teachers can lead to helplessness, especially in novice teachers (R. Smith, 2004). Such feelings foster distorted perceptions of the value of one's work. A teacher who experiences a disconnect between career expectations and perceived career value can develop feelings of despair and meaninglessness (Dworkin, 1987; McDonald & Shirley, 2009).

Teachers surveyed in their first 3 years of work identify several needs: (a) practical and logistical information about the policies and operations of their school setting; (b) formal and informal opportunities to discuss ideas with their colleagues; (c) an opportunity to contextualize and find solutions to their everyday teaching problems; and (d) emotional support and guidance without fear of negative professional evaluations (Chubbuck, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001).

**Table 1**  
**Risk and Protective Factors for Teacher Stress at Various Levels of Analysis**

<i>Level</i>	<i>Risk Factors</i>	<i>Protective Factors</i>
Personal	Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support network</li> <li>• Mentor match in same teaching area within school</li> <li>• Mentor match in same teaching area outside school</li> <li>• Participation in induction programs</li> </ul>
	Inadequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Safe friend or mentor</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> </ul>
	Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise</li> <li>• Organizational skills</li> <li>• Engagement in well-being activities</li> </ul>
	Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance, mindful meditation, growth mindset</li> <li>• Classroom Management</li> <li>• Student voice</li> </ul>
Interpersonal	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular communication</li> <li>• Parents as partners</li> </ul>
	Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize competition</li> <li>• Sharing</li> <li>• Caring and compassion</li> </ul>
Organizational	Role clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of principal's expectations</li> <li>• Workload clarification</li> </ul>
	Disempowering policies and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create participatory structures</li> <li>• Enhance teacher control of policies</li> <li>• Increase teacher voice and choice</li> </ul>

Additional areas of stress include keeping up with paperwork, grading student work, dealing with student conflicts, doubts and worries about personal competence, and feelings of insufficient job preparation (Breeding & Whitworth, 1995, Brock & Grady, 1996).

One effective way to counteract such personal risk factors is provision of assistance from successful colleagues in a supportive environment (Bessell, Medina, Pilonieta, Pacheco-Plaza, & Kloosterman, 2007; Dweck, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). A growing body of research supports the idea that teacher mentoring and induction programs can increase novice teachers' efficacy, job satisfaction, and retention (Holloway, 2001; T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Strong & St. John, 2001; Wilson, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 2001). These

successful programs are not to be confused with the random pairing of veteran teachers and novice teachers without formal guidelines and objectives, or orientations often described as "a set of talking heads enumerating the rules, policies, and procedures of the school" (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005, p. 33).

Mentoring is the action a person takes to provide support and assistance to another. Effective teacher mentoring should address two problems: the abrupt and unsupported entry of first year teachers into the profession, and the challenge of keeping good teachers in the classroom. As a result of the guidance and support received through mentoring, beginning teachers felt more competent and motivated and indicated that they were more willing to stay in the teaching profession (Whitaker, 2000). In fact,

first-year teachers who had a mentor in their field were 30% less likely to leave the profession at the end of their first year teaching (T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Teacher mentoring has been found to be most effective when novice teachers are paired with mentors in the same teaching area (Johnson et al., 2005).

Mentoring is often a component of well-developed induction programs (Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005). Such programs are effective when they offer several levels of support, including mentorship from the same field, teacher collaboration, external network involvement, beginners' seminars, teachers' aides, and supportive communication with administrators (T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). High retention rates have been found for novice teachers who participated in such induction programs (Kelley, 2004). It is very likely that the mechanism at work in all mentoring and induction programs is enhanced self-efficacy (Dicke, Elling, Schmeck, Leutner, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2014; Yu, Wang, Zhai, Dai, & Yang, 2015).

In addition to supportive structures, teachers can use mindful meditation, acceptance, and self-compassion (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012; Herman & Reinke, 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Roeser et al., 2013), as well as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). These are psychological strategies aimed to cope with negative feelings and emotions. Mindfulness, acceptance, and self-compassion counteract feelings of guilt and self-blame. A growth mindset, in turn, teaches that challenges are opportunities for growth, as opposed to reflections of inadequacy. What these psychological strategies have in common is acceptance of our situation without succumbing to it. By reframing challenges as opportunities for growth, we redirect attention away from self-blame and towards active coping (Hartney, 2008; Herman & Reinke, 2015).

Teacher well-being can be enhanced not only by reducing risk factors, but also by increasing protective factors. Research supports active engagement in the pursuit of well-being, as well as meaningful relationships, celebration of achievements, and the cultivation of gratitude and positive emotions (Seligman 2011).

### Interpersonal Level

Teachers are expected to have positive and effective interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and supervisors. Yet, interpersonal relationships can be an area of risk. Interpersonal struggles include classroom discipline, student behavior, parent-teacher communication, and relationship with colleagues (Breeding & Whitworth, 1995; Brock & Grady, 1996; Hartney, 2008; Herman & Reinke, 2015; Stroot et al., 1999). Discrepancies between parent and teacher expectations, especially for novice teachers, can be a source of great stress (Robertson, 2008). Teachers expect that parents will value and appreciate their work and understand the difficulties they face. Parents, however, expect that teachers will raise the academic performance of their children, teach interpersonal skills, and prevent or solve various academic and social problems that their children may experience. Parents and teachers may have conflicting views about discipline, homework, and reinforcement of school rules. Teachers can even be confronted by aggressive or irate parents (Holmes, 2005).

Interpersonal relations with students can also be a major source of stress for teachers. In the vernacular, this is referred to as *classroom management* or *student discipline*, and is a primary reason teachers give for leaving the profession (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hamba-cher, 2007; Robertson, 2008). Beginner educators, especially, may not understand the complex relationships between management, behavior, and academic tasks, because they lack classroom practice (Dicke et al., 2015; Kagan, 1992). This inexperience increases teacher anxiety and, in turn, affects the manner in which teachers perceive and interpret the severity of student behavior.

The stress engendered by seemingly intractable student discipline issues is not inevitable, however. Protective factors, such as professional development regarding management techniques, help teachers feel more competent (Bergeron, 2008; Dicke et al., 2015). The American Psychological Association developed online modules aimed to help teachers with classroom management. This valuable resource may be

accessed at <http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/activities/class-management.aspx>.

Interpersonal skills are valuable in dealing with charged environments. Training to become more assertive in the classroom and the staff room is useful, but so is a climate of support. A caring and compassionate working environment is an important protective factor. Empathic listening and supportive mentoring are interpersonal antidotes to the adversarial relationships teachers often experience in working with colleagues, students, and parents. Instrumental and emotional support are essential in both problem solving and psychological well-being (Hartney, 2008; Herman & Reinke, 2015).

### **Organizational Level**

Another source of stressors for teachers can be found at the organizational level. The actions of the administration, the management style of the principal, as well as the school's organizational climate, can affect a teacher's sense of well-being (Dworkin, 1987). When organizational demands seem out of balance with a sense of personal control, the resulting tension can create great stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Marmot, 2004, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2014; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006; Yu, Wang, Zhai, Dai, & Yang, 2015).

Beginning teachers are likely to be placed in difficult teaching scenarios without the professional support needed. This breeds feelings of inadequacy and resignation. Feelings of isolation, anxiety, and inadequacy, reviewed previously, emanate from a variety of organizational sources: (a) teacher preparation programs that do not equip teachers for daily classroom demands, (b) the emotional intensity of teaching, and (c) workplaces not organized to support entry into the profession (Dicke et al., 2015; Liston et al., 2006).

Organizational risk factors abound for teachers, starting with the structure of the school itself. Schools have not been designed to support the learning of teachers, novice or veteran (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Payne, 2008; Sarason, 1990). In addition, there are numerous demands on teacher

time and many challenges to teacher feelings of self-worth. Principal and teacher expectations may be highly discrepant (Brock & Grady, 1998). The assigned workload may be overwhelming (Holmes, 2005). A teacher's job description can be so loosely constructed so that additional duties and responsibilities are often added without consideration for whether they can be reasonably accomplished (Shirom et al., 2009). Prescriptive curricula, changing instructional priorities, poor school morale, excessive paperwork, perceived safety issues, staff conflicts—all of these organizational risk factors add to a teacher's sense of powerlessness (McCarthy et al., 2014).

There are several protective factors that can offset the risk factors that teachers, especially new teachers, experience. In the University of Miami Teacher Support Network and in many other supportive mentoring groups around the country, experienced teachers share what they have learned about surviving and thriving in the organizational climate of the school (T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). As one gains skill and experience, confidence can be increased by participating in the school culture and helping to bring about positive organizational changes. Through mutual support groups, teachers develop a sense of empowerment when they learn that they have strengths of their own (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Professional learning communities offer a safe space for teachers to problem solve and foster a sense of belonging. Creating empowering settings and affording voice and choice to teachers can go a long way in improving school climate (Aber, Maton, & Seidman, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). When properly implemented, and adequately supported by the school district, these communities achieve three goals: better educational outcomes for students, enhanced well-being for teachers, and improved policies and procedures at the school (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006).

### **Summary and Implications for Action**

This brief review highlights the need for action on the part of teachers, teacher preparation

programs, administrators, and school district officials. Starting from the personal to the institutional, individual teachers can benefit from mindfulness training and self-compassion. Because isolation is such a big part of the experience of novice teachers, it is incumbent upon new and veteran educators to seek out and create support groups. In some districts, these take the form of professional learning communities or PLCs. These groups should be present in every school. Teacher preparation programs need to pay more attention to classroom management and to psychological techniques to cope with stress, such as mindfulness, self-compassion, acceptance, and active coping. Principals need to enable the formation of PLCs and assign mentors to junior colleagues. Districts, in turn, need to implement induction programs and regular professional development opportunities dealing with classroom management and teacher well-being.

Psychological dynamics of anxiety, fear, isolation and inadequacy exacerbate stress. Doubts about self-efficacy permeate the lives of new teachers. Interpersonally, stress results from conflict with colleagues, superiors, parents, and students. Administrators must work to create a climate of emotional and professional support that enables growth. Under conditions of fear and retribution not much learning takes place. Organizationally, role ambiguity is a major threat to occupational well-being.

Teacher stress is the collective responsibility of teachers, principals, training programs, and superintendents, and educators ignore it at their own peril. Much can be done at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels.

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#### Additional Resources

- Caruana, V. (2008). *Apples and chalkdust: 180 inspirational stories and encouragement for teachers*. New York, NY: Howard Books.  
In this book, veteran teacher Vicki Caruana provides encouraging and practical insights that can help teachers meet the challenges of teaching with a renewed sense of energy and effectiveness.
- Draper, S. M. (2001). *Not quite burned out, but crispy around the edges: Inspiration, laughter, and encouragement for teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.  
Sharon Draper, 1997 Teacher of the Year, provides inspiration and encouragement to those who no longer feel that they can cope with the daily stress and pressures.
- Larrivee, B. (2012). *Cultivating teacher renewal: Guarding against stress and burnout*. R&L Education.  
Larrivee acknowledges that outside factors affect teacher stress and burnout; however, by providing evidence-based strategies she urges teachers to take control of their own well-being.

**TIP**