

Bridge



Department of Health

This Newsletter aims to promote communication between schools and the Student Health Service of the Department of Health

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Editorial

Being a teacher today brings challenges and satisfactions. Teachers have to follow a busy school curriculum and manage a classroom of students with different needs from different background. They motivate and encourage students to learn as well as taking care of their psycho-social needs.

After class, teachers also need to keep close contact with parents, helping them to develop their children in academic and other abilities. Moreover, teachers are required to work with their colleagues to prepare for the extra-curricular activities for their students.

Last but not the least, like other people, they also have a role to play in their own family.

Nowadays, the public has a high expectation on teachers. Teachers need to guide their students to compete in different settings and some at international level. All these will add to the pressure they already have.

Clinical psychologist of the Student Health Service would like to explore with teachers the issue of stress and the ways to cope with it, with an aim to enhance their capability to face various challenges in their daily life.



From the Editor

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STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION

Stress is a part of life, particularly when we have a hectic schedule. Overwhelming stress has become an increasingly common phenomenon. Teachers have many duties and responsibilities that will easily bring a lot of stress. Therefore, it is important for teachers to learn stress management skills to reduce the damaging effects of stress on physical and mental health. Many teachers have probably heard about stress management techniques such as "Breathing exercise", "Muscular relaxation" and "Guided imagery". However, stress management is much more than that and in this article we shall clarify some misunderstandings about stress and explain how stress can affect our physical and mental well-being. Finally, we shall discuss how we can enhance our ability to manage stress.

CLARIFY SOME COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT STRESS

Misunderstanding #1: Stress is no good

Some people may look for a stress free life as the perfect solution to over-stress. However, stress is necessary in life for learning, working, and even for survival. Studies on the relationship between stress and performance find that our ability to perform increases up to a certain level of stress arousal. Nevertheless, if stress continues to increase after an optimum point is reached, any further stress arousal will take the performance level down, leading to physical and mental exhaustion.



Misunderstanding #2: Feeling over-stressed?

It's your own problem!

Stress is a subjective feeling that is created when we react to particular events. Due to individual differences in their past experience, demands and resources as well as coping responses, stress has varying effects on individual's well-being. Therefore, feeling over-stressed does not necessarily indicate weakness in one's character or ability.

Misunderstanding #3: Popular relaxation technique is best for everyone

There is no single relaxation technique that is best for everyone. Each person has unique ways to relax. When choosing a relaxation technique, we need to consider personal needs, preferences, fitness level, lifestyle, and our usual stress responses. For example, for those who tend to become agitated or worked up under stress, they may respond better to relaxation techniques that quiet them down like diaphragmatic breathing. For those who tend to become withdrawn under stress, they need relaxation techniques that can energize them, like rhythmic exercise. Sometimes, alternating or combining different relaxation techniques will yield more desirable results.

Misunderstanding #4: I can do nothing to stress because after all it is unavoidable in life

Stress is unavoidable but necessary in life. What we need is the skills to bring stress level back to a balanced state that enables us to perform well without damaging our mind and body. For example, learning how to set priorities will help us to work more productively and therefore is a useful tool for stress management.



WHAT IS STRESS

Stress is a subjective feeling. When we think we cannot meet the external and internal demands made upon us, the feeling of stress arises. Examples of external demands are major life changes, heavy workload and relationship difficulties. Stress can also be self-generated. Examples of internal demands are unrealistic expectations, perfectionism and negative self-talk. In addition, factors like the way we appraise situations as stressful, availability of coping resources, and our typical coping responses also affect our subjective feeling of stress.

IMPACTS ON OVER-STRESSED

Stress brings about physiological and psychological responses. Physiologically, the rise of adrenalin and cortisol increases the heart rate, breathing rate, and muscle tension that help our body to deal with the stress or to exit the situation, when necessary. Psychologically we feel anxious and heighten our vigilance. Long-term exposure to stress disrupts our health. It can leave us more vulnerable to anxiety and depression, give rise to muscular pain, make us feel exhausted and even affect our immune system. Besides, stress has behavioral consequences which in some cases, like overeating, can have physical consequences, such as overweight, which add further stress on us, creating a vicious cycle.

TIPS FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

Eliminate unnecessary demands

Managing stress is about taking charge of our life: making changes to our schedule and workload by becoming assertive at home, school, and other stressful circumstances and to eliminate unnecessary demands through communication. Besides having formal discussion, informal gatherings can sometimes be a useful platform to share the concerns of teachers and to build peer support.

Modify irrational thinking pattern

We often engage in rational and irrational thinking throughout the day. However, if we keep thinking to ourselves in a distorted or negative way e.g, "I am no good", "I must be a perfect teacher" or "all students dislike their teachers", our thoughts have fallen into an irrational pattern that leave us out of synchrony with reality, and result in self-defeating, rigid or ineffective behaviors. Try to identify and modify irrational thinking pattern by answering the question, "Is there any rational support for my thought?" Try to substitute it with more realistic views of the situation. It would be easier to identify our irrational thinking pattern if we adopt an open attitude and listen to more opinions from different people.

CASE STUDY:

Mr Wong was considered as a very hard working teacher. Every morning he was the first to arrive at school and the last to leave. He prepared all the teaching aids by himself and they were of very high standard. He always said he would not allow himself to achieve anything less than perfection. He frequently received praises from the principal and colleagues because of his dedication and high standard of work. In order to keep up his work performance, Mr Wong had given up his family and social activities. He did not get enough sleep and even attended school when he was ill. Recently, he became very irritable and felt depress.

ANALYSIS:

We respect the dedication of Mr Wong to his teaching duties. However, in order to achieve his high standard at work he had sacrificed his own health and his family. Mr Wong's perfectionist view is irrational. After all, we are human, to achieve perfect score for every piece of work that we do would no doubt bring us a lot of stress. We should be practical and set reasonable and achievable goals. We should also expand our life experiences, listen to opinions from different people and provide more opportunities to think positively. These will help us to achieve a more rational mindset.

Change unhealthy lifestyle

In a hectic city like Hong Kong, immediate gratification is considered to be the norm for some people. Our need to be in a hurry becomes a habit. We eat, talk and walk fast for no apparent reasons. Yet, for some people who embrace slowness find that they can actually work and live in a more relaxed way. When we notice that our fast-paced lifestyle has brought stress upon us, we can use self-verbalization like "Let me slow down. I am not in a hurry" to guide our pace.

Moreover, some teachers struggle to cope with an unending tide of phone calls and electronic messages, like emails. It is recommended to check these messages just a few times a day in order to stop being interrupted by them and to reduce stress level.



Practicing relaxation techniques

There are different types of relaxation techniques. Here are the common ones:

Diaphragmatic breathing exercise: We tend to take shallow breaths when feeling anxious or stressful. Shallow breathing limits oxygen intake and adds more stress to the body, creating a vicious cycle. Diaphragmatic breathing involves the expansion of the abdomen rather than the chest when breathing. By doing so, diaphragmatic breathing increases the amount of oxygen intake, leading to physiological changes that help stress relief.

Progressive muscle relaxation: Progressive muscle relaxation entails physical and mental components. The physical component involves alternately tensing and relaxing groups of muscles. The mental component focuses particularly on the sensations in the relaxed muscle after it is tensed, and that bring about the feeling of relaxation.



Guided imagery: Neuropsychological studies show that our mind's workings can influence our body's health. Guided imagery involves both visual imagery of a peaceful place and body awareness on different physical sensations. When we vividly imagines a peaceful event, our brain responds the same way as it would if we were actually experiencing that event.

Sensory relaxation techniques: Through experiencing or imaging the sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste and/or touch, a person is moved into a state of relaxation.

It is important to fit relaxation techniques into our life in order to reduce our everyday stress level and generate a feeling of restfulness. It is suggested to set aside a time each day to practice relaxation techniques regularly to master the skills.

Establish emotional support network

It is common to feel overwhelmed with stress at some points in life no matter how efficient or optimistic a person is. A strong emotional support network is an enormous buffer against life's stressors. Accepting help and support from sympathetic and compassionate family members, friends and colleagues who care about us strengthens resilience that helps us adapt to stressful circumstances.



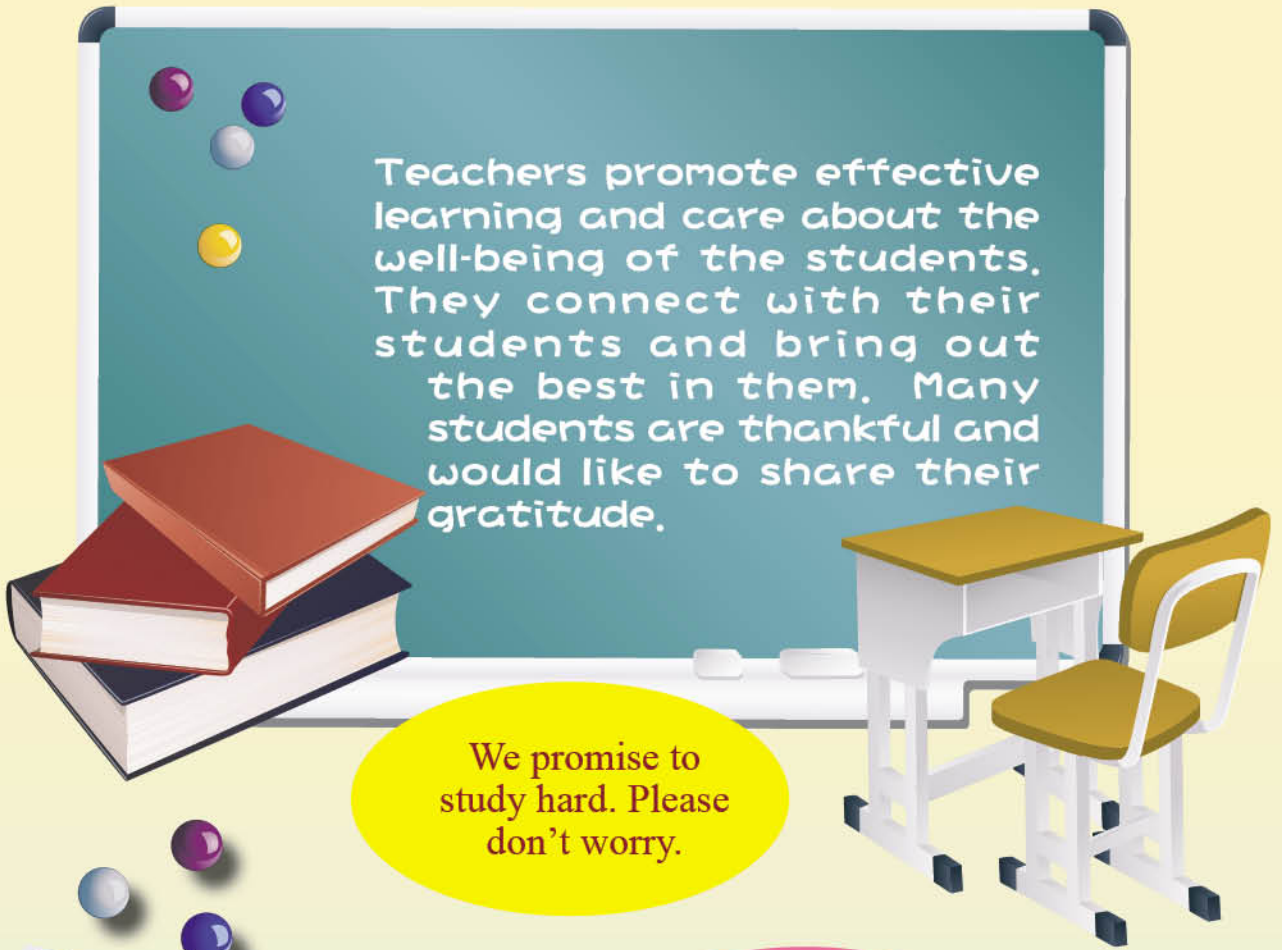
Self nurturing

Studies have shown that people who eat a balanced diet, sleep sufficiently and exercise regularly have higher capacity to tolerate stress. Many teachers work long hours. In between work, they should spend two or three minutes doing breathing or muscle relaxation exercise to relax. Some teachers often work through the lunch hours. However, having ample time to rest during lunch helps refuel the body and mind for the rest of the day. In addition, it is necessary to have spare time not only for professional development but also for fun like watching a favorite movie. A heartily laugh will give us a sense of ease.

CONCLUSION

Although stress is unavoidable in daily life, teachers can learn stress management skills to keep stress level in a balanced state that enable them to teach well without damaging their mind and body.





We promise to study hard. Please don't worry.

Not only do you teach us Chinese, but also how to discipline ourselves. Thank you!

I hope that my teachers are happy everyday.

Thank you for your forgiveness.

I will thank you with my best result.

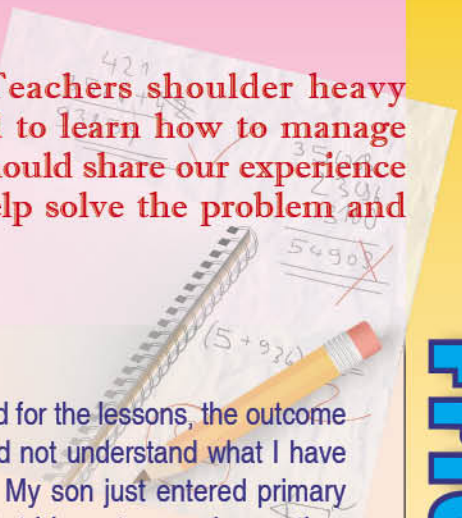
With years of your teaching, I have changed from an innocent child to a person with wisdom.

We support you all the time. Please keep up and teach more students to be good.

You pass us lots of knowledge with passion. We support you.



School is a place for students to develop and learn. Teachers shoulder heavy responsibilities and experience a lot of stress. They need to learn how to manage stress and keep themselves relaxed. When necessary, we should share our experience and feelings with others and seek help actively. It can help solve the problem and gain support from others.



To Health Station:

I am very unhappy recently. I found that no matter how hard I prepared for the lessons, the outcome was still not satisfactory. My students were either not interested in or could not understand what I have said. Very often, I have to bring home my work, which seemed endless. My son just entered primary school and he started to have more and more school work. I understand that I have to spend more time with him but I really cannot afford to do so. I feel that I am getting more and more stressful. I would like to talk to someone and I hope that you can help me with my problems.

A teacher

Dear A Teacher,

Thank you for your letter. We understand that you are upset because of your students' responses during class. You thought that it might be due to your inadequate preparatory work. From your letter, we know you are a responsible teacher. You are concerned about the quality of work and the knowledge building of your students. However, we hope you understand that there are many factors affecting the motivation and comprehension of students and teacher's performance is only one of them. If you feel that "no matter how hard you prepared, the outcome was still not satisfactory", you could discuss with your colleagues to see whether there is any problem in the way you prepared for the lessons or are you expecting too much from yourself.

You have also mentioned that you need to take up your own time to finish the work at home and you have to deal with the increased demand on your child's school work. These make you stressful. Stress may make us breathe faster and our muscle tense up. If the condition persists for a long time, our health will be affected. We suggest you to do some relaxation exercises such as breathing exercise and muscle relaxation exercise. In addition, children education and caring should be shared by both parents and should not be burdened to any one party. As other working parents may share the same problem and stress as you, you can exchange your experience with them e.g. teaching method, children care, leisure activities, etc. You may be enlightened with new ideas during the process and ventilation is in fact a way to relief your stress. If your stress persists and makes you feel uncomfortable, you should seek help from professionals, such as family doctor, clinical psychologist or social workers. Wish you success and happiness in your work and life.

Health Station

- *1 Relaxation Exercise can be download from the following website: http://cheu.gov.hk/b5/resources/mental_Printed.htm
- *2 If you require assistance, please refer to the following:
 1. **Social Welfare Service Hotline**
The hotline will be answered by officers during their duty hour. Service provision includes counselling, support and enquiry. Appropriate follow-up will be arranged if required.
Social Welfare Hotline: 2343 2255 Website: www.swd.gov.hk
 2. **The Hong Kong Council of Social Service**
The Council works on promoting the public awareness of social welfare services, it provides a list of hotlines and related links to various social services.
Phone No.: 2864 2929 Website: www.hkcss.org.hk
 3. **Division of Clinical Psychology, The Hong Kong Psychological Society**
A list (June 2011) of Registered Psychologist with private practice is provided for reference.
Website: www.dcp.hkps.org.hk/downloads/others/Private_Practice_June_2011_Chinese.pdf

Interesting knowledge Q&A

Q: Prolonged psychological stress may give rise to a series of physical and psychological health problems except:

- A: a. Agitated mood
b. Cirrhosis
c. Depressive mood
d. Muscle pain

(Answer: find it out from the newsletter)

To avoid excessive stress, the best way is to be optimistic, lead a balanced life and handle stress appropriately. There are some ways to cope with stress, and they are:

1. Be realistic and strive for achievable goals.
2. Work and play according to schedule.
3. Always be relaxed and happy.
4. Make good use of leisure time and develop healthy hobbies.
5. Establish good interpersonal relationship and expand support network.
6. Share your life experiences with others
7. Be nice to yourself, live healthily.
8. Seek help from others when you are upset.

Health Tips

Health Box

For enquiries of student's health problem,
please write to "Health Box"

Please write
your name
& address,
contact tel. no.
in the letter.

Health Box
4/F, Lam Tin Polyclinic,
99 Kai Tin Road,
Kwun Tong,
Kowloon