

Taking stress seriously

Dr Helen Willis, Stress Management Consultant, discusses prioritising self-care for teachers

Introduction

In March 2021, Kevin Courtney (the joint general secretary of the National Education Union), when commenting on recent research from UCL, said: "Both high workload and high stress are factors in teachers and leaders deciding to leave the profession"¹. This is obviously a situation which will come as no surprise to all staff within the teaching profession, particularly after the significant additional burdens imposed by Covid-19. The pressures of the job are never going to go away, but there are a wide range of stress management techniques (each with a sound scientific basis) that can interrupt the pattern of chronic stress and promote both physical and mental health.

As a result, there is perhaps no better time to start taking stress seriously and to prioritise self-care for teachers who are experiencing unmanageable stress levels on an everyday basis.

Why is stress becoming such an issue?

Teaching has always been a demanding profession, but recent events surrounding the global pandemic have created a perfect storm, where "the additional workload involved in trying to reintegrate students back into the classroom after a year dominated by lockdowns"¹ has meant that many teachers are at breaking point. Despite our apparent sophistication as a human race, we are fundamentally (physiologically) still basic and rather primitive creatures, and there is a limit to the cognitive load that we can tolerate before physical and mental deterioration, ill-health, and eventually breakdown occur².

At the heart of all of this is our most primitive protective mechanism, based on the 'fight or flight' response^{2,3}. When a threat to survival is perceived, this protective mechanism triggers the secretion of a range of chemicals (including adrenaline and cortisol) that prepare the body physically to either stand and fight, or run away⁴. Blood is diverted from the peripheries to the vital organs, gut motility slows down, and the muscles are primed for optimum efficiency for either the actions of fight or flight^{4,5}. All of this is just wonderful if you actually do need to engage in fisticuffs or run for your life. It is not, however, a useful response if the threats that are being responded to are not actual, but instead just perceived, simply because the frustrations of coping with multiple issues and the demands of multi-tasking create a state of cognitive overload.

Unfortunately, our brains cannot discriminate between physical threat and psychological inundation. As a direct result, when the demands on our cognitive resources exceed the capacity that we have to process complex information, we become cognitively overloaded and our bodies will respond with a full-blown 'fight or flight' response⁶, even though this is completely and utterly unnecessary to our survival. To make matters worse, the multisensory bombardment that we have created in our

working lives through the marvels of the digital age is threatening our capacity to cope cognitively every moment of our working day⁷.

Consequently, it is absolutely inevitable that the 'fight or flight' response is triggered repeatedly on an everyday basis, flooding our bodies with chemicals that we do not want or even need, yet are being secreted without our knowledge or consent⁴.

Not only this, every time this happens, we increase our chances of significant mental and physical health problems because of the risk of dysfunctional activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis)^{6, 8}.

This HPA axis is our second line of defence, designed to help the body enter 'survival mode' in response to physical threat^{6, 8}. Surges of hormones produced by the three endocrine glands involved in the HPA axis rearrange our physiological functioning creating a 'siege' mentality within the body. Some functions deemed unnecessary are reduced³⁻⁶, such as the activity of the immune system. This increases our susceptibility to infections and allergies and increases the incidence of inflammatory responses. The inflammatory changes also increase the likelihood of joint stiffness and pain on movement. Gut motility and the ability to process food and water within the intestines are also significantly reduced, leading to fluid retention, bloating and constipation, as well as increased likelihood of irritable bowel problems. In addition, the peripheral circulation shuts down further, leading to poor blood perfusion in fingers and toes, and sensations of coldness. Furthermore, infertility is also likely as reproduction is another function deemed unnecessary and therefore suppressed in this 'survival mode' state.

Again, all of these changes are utterly ideal if, in response to an external threat, you need to reduce functioning into almost a state of hibernation in order to survive. They are not even slightly desirable, however, if they are triggered by just having a bad day (or series of bad days) at the 'chalkface'. To make things worse, all of these changes are occurring at an unconscious level, as an automatic and almost reflex reaction in response to perceived threats to survival that do not even actually exist^{4, 6}. Many of us will not even be aware that such significant bodily changes are occurring (due to HPA axis dysfunction) until the reactions become so chronic and persistent (and the physical symptoms become so apparent) that they manifest in actual ill health^{4, 5}.

Furthermore, in lockstep with all of these alterations in physiology, mental health changes can also progressively become apparent^{4, 5, 8}. It is thought that these changes are mediated principally via the amygdala in the brain (which is the centre for emotion processing). The amygdala seems to be particularly vulnerable to the secretion of stress

hormones. There is evidence that its functioning and even its actual physical structure can be changed by stress⁸. As a result, changes in mental health, such as mood swings, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, unhealthy reward-seeking behaviour (eg, over-eating and excessive alcohol intake), anxiety, and depression can begin to manifest^{4, 5, 8}.

Unfortunately, this is not the end to the potential damage caused by HPA axis dysfunction. There is very recent evidence that long-term feelings of stress and anxiety, such as that caused by work-related stress, lead to an inflammatory response (initiated by the HPA axis) that impairs clearance of beta amyloid and tau proteins⁹. The accumulation of these proteins then increases the risk of neurodegeneration; memory loss, and even shrinkage of grey matter. As a result, chronic stress is now being recognised as a risk factor for the increased cognitive decline seen in Alzheimer's disease. So, there is now evidence of a link between 'psychosocial stressors' (such as a stressful working environment) and Alzheimer's in genetically susceptible individuals⁹.

As a result, it is essential to find new ways to manage stress, particularly in the workplace.

Skills for self-care

It is possible to use a series of stress management techniques to prevent the unnecessary initiation of the 'fight or flight' response and reduce the risk of HPA axis dysfunction. The frustration, however, is that there is no 'one size fits all' solution, which could be globally introduced to fix everything once and for all. This is because we are all literally wired differently, which means that our connectome (which is the complete map of the connections made between our brain cells) is completely and utterly

unique to the individual¹⁰⁻¹².

This means individual variability in how over 100 billion neurones and around 700 trillion connections in the human brain are configured. So, our connectome is as unique to each and every one of us as our fingerprints¹⁰. As a result, stress management techniques that work for one individual may not be as effective for another. It is necessary, therefore, to work on a one-to-one basis to find the right combination of therapeutic approaches that have the best results in reducing the factors which could trigger the stress response.

There are, however, several key types of intervention that can confer self-care skills in stress management, namely: breath coaching, emotional freedom techniques, neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and hypnotherapy.

For instance, a skilled breath coach can enable their client to find the right combination of breathing patterns to prevent unwanted activation of the sympathetic nervous system, (involved as part of the 'fight or flight' response) and to also stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system to induce relaxation, as well as promote restful sleep¹³.

Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) involve the activation of specific acupressure points, which (in turn) promote physiological as well as psychological responses¹⁴. This activation can potentially counteract the bodily effects of the 'fight or flight' response. EFT also use the power of language to enable a psychological reframing of issues that may be initiating the 'fight or flight' response. An example might be if you were having angry thoughts about a situation occurring at school: using EFT, you can work with your therapist to find a phrase to say (while you are

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stimulating the acupuncture points) which reframes the experience into something that releases this angst and all of its associated negative effects on the mind and body.

The various techniques in NLP serve to identify how each person perceives and processes their world and how each person communicates this experience both to themselves and to others¹⁵. Through this, it becomes possible to 'unpack' and identify any unhelpful thinking patterns and reprogram them into more productive and positive mindsets. This is why NLP can be valuable in stress management. Not only does it give you self-knowledge about how you experience the world (which is empowering), it also helps with adjusting and fine-tuning your natural thinking patterns (ie, your internal dialogue), so you can become the person that you want to be. In this way, through NLP, you can learn to edit out and even delete any internal programmes (that are adding unnecessary burdens to your mind and body) and thus avoid the stress response.

Hypnotherapy uses techniques of hypnotic suggestion and hypnoanalysis to encourage productive changes¹⁶. It is essentially a form of mental 'spring-cleaning'. This can bring considerable stress relief, by removing the clutter formed by unhelpful, 'damaged' or unnecessary subconscious templates that have no use and are just adding to cognitive load (and stimulating the stress response). A range of hypnotherapy techniques can also be used to prevent stressful situations from actually triggering the stress response in the first place¹⁷.

In my experience, the best results (in terms of developing effective self-care tools) are achieved by using a combination of these techniques in a bespoke fashion to exactly meet the personality, experience and emotional needs of each individual.

Conclusion

Self-care tools to actively counteract the damaging physiological changes caused by chronic stress are now available. However, they involve investment of time and money, because teaching staff would need to be released from class to attend the stress management sessions and this support would need to be paid for, too. Nevertheless, in my experience as a stress management consultant, clients can gain very effective stress management self-care skills in just a few one-to-one sessions. Also, very importantly, these clients appear to continue to gain benefit from these interventions for a considerable period afterwards. So, now is exactly the right time to start taking stress seriously and make this self-care training a priority, in order to promote well-being (despite ongoing stressful working conditions) and retain incredibly valuable and essential teaching staff. ■



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HoSS – We want to hear from your HoSS

BATOD is updating its 'Features of effective services' document to reflect changes which have occurred during the number of years since it was first published.

We are very keen to draw on the experience of current heads of service in updating it.

The purpose of the document is to bring into one place the key features of an effective service to reflect the roles and activities of services across the UK and in all types and sizes of local authority. The document should be useful for all heads of service and should provide particular support for heads of service who are not from a deaf education background.

The preliminary document on which we would appreciate your comments is here:

www.batod.org.uk/information/draft-initial-update-of-features-of-effective-services-for-heads-of-service/

Please let us know by responding via this survey monkey link:

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/BATOD_Effective_Sensory_Services

We are keen to ensure its relevance to all four nations of the UK as well as to all types, population and size of local authority so please bear that in mind in your responses.

Please comment on each section, highlighting issues which you feel need clarification or expansion and any you feel need to be removed or added.

The document is currently in the form of a series of bullet points but the intention is to produce a more narrative-type of document once all aspects have been considered.



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