



Stress and Mindfulness

IS THE CLASSROOM A STRESSFUL PLACE?

Nearly 8 in 10 educators feel physically or emotionally exhausted at the end of their work day.

In May 2015, 30,000 respondents took a survey on well-being, working conditions and stressors for educators designed by the AFT and Bad Ass Teachers (BATs). Among the findings were:

73 percent of all respondents reported feeling stressed at their workplace often. They were also more likely to feel emotionally exhausted because of their job.

26 percent reported their mental health (stress, depression, and emotional challenges) was not good in the last 30 days, for nine or more days.

18 percent of all respondents reported threat with violence at school or in a school setting; the number went up to 27 percent for special education teachers.

15 percent of educators strongly agreed with the statement “I am enthusiastic about my profession” at the present, a drop from the 89 percent that strongly agreed with this statement at the beginning of their career.

Despite such stressful work environments, only 14 percent of the respondents were very likely to seek employment outside. Even when dealing with challenges such as time pressure, lack of training, uncertain job expectations, student aggression and disciplinary issues, most educators were committed to the work they did. Such dedication is commendable, and characteristic of many of our educators. However, working day after day to the

point of being burnt out can have serious physical, mental, as well as academic well-being implications.

“Teachers should be treated with respect in every way. When decisions are made or when problems arise, teachers should not be dumped on.” - survey respondent.

STRESS IS TOXIC FOR THE BODY AND MIND.

Chronically stressed individuals spend 46 percent more on healthcare costs than those who are not stressed.

When threatened, the body’s heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breathe quickens, and your senses become sharper. This fight or flight response is quick, automatic, and the body’s way of protecting itself against a threat. However, when our stress response systems are overworked, over prolonged periods of time, the same adaptive responses become dangerous for the body. Stress can lead to both physical and psychological health issues.

Whether it is an actual life-threatening situation or work life stressors, the body’s responds to both with the same intensity. The more often the body’s stress responses get activated, the more difficult it becomes to slow down or decrease the stress-induced responses that can disrupt the body’s cardiovascular, immune, neuroendocrine and central nervous systems. Chronic stress, where individuals are exposed to stress for long-periods of time, is particularly damaging. It can lead to anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain as well as illnesses such as heart disease, obesity and depression.

BECOMING MINDFUL ABOUT STRESS

Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Rather than letting life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience.

Work shouldn't hurt. While it is not possible to eliminate all stressors from our life, stress management techniques such as mindfulness teach us how to cope in healthful ways. The National Institute of Health (NIH) has been studying Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs and its impact on physical and psychological health. The science shows mindfulness to be highly effective stress-management tool.

MINDFULNESS CAN HELP YOU *THRIVE!*

Teachers lower blood pressure, negative emotions, symptoms of depression, and increase compassion and empathy.

Helps boost immune system after 8 weeks of mindfulness training.

Reduces student behavioral problems & aggression.

Increases brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.

Valuing emotion regulation helps adults cultivate and maintain positive classroom relationships, reducing stress.

Effective as anti-depressants in fighting depression and negative emotions, as reported in a study.

MINDFUL CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Mindfulness, through the practice of open attention and non-judgmental observation, allows us to be aware of our own emotional reactivity, and respond more thoughtfully in the classroom. Educators can use mindfulness activities with students as part of their classroom management strategies. This can reduce disruptive student behavior which is associated with reduced teacher stress.

Tips to cultivate mindfulness:

- *One minute breathing* helps the classroom focus. Breathing in and out, hold breathes for a few seconds each time. Encourage students to focus on each body part for a few seconds and notice its movements.
- *Raisin Activity*, instruct students to silently contemplate a raisin for 10 full minutes: to take a close look at, touch, smell and, finally, taste, chew, and swallow a single raisin.
- *Journaling* provides students something to say in discussion, or provide a time for reflection and calming in the midst of a challenging or intense activity.

COMMON SIGNS OF STRESS

Cognitive

Memory problems
Inability to concentrate
Poor judgement
Seeing only the negative
Anxious or racing thoughts
Constant worrying

Emotional

Moodiness
Irritability or short temper
Agitation, inability to relax
Feeling overwhelmed
Sense of loneliness
Isolation
Depression

Physical

Aches and pains
Diarrhea or constipation
Nausea and dizziness
Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
Loss of sex drive
Frequent colds

Behavioral

Eating more or less
Irregular sleep
Isolating self from others
Neglecting responsibilities
Cigarette or alcohol use
Nervous habits

For more information, contact the health and safety team at 4healthandsafety@aft.org