

# STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR TEACHERS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

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**Index:** Managing Change, Classroom Behaviours, Win/Win Solutions.

**Abstract:** Much of the stress of teaching is related to problem behaviour in the classrooms. The most effective way of managing behavioural problems is to prevent them from arising, and to minimize their occurrence. The focus is the teacher's ability and willingness to create a successful learning situation appropriate to the student's needs. Essentially, stress can be a challenging, exciting stimulus to personal growth, whilst excessive stress can prove damaging to psychological and physical health because it often triggers emotional and physical strain that may be harmful. So, people are motivated to cope with stress. However, the reactions to stress and its adaptive value vary from one person to the next and from time to time for the same person. Decisions about how to cope can consequently be complex. Thus, this paper will highlight some of the more adaptive stress coping strategies, with examples and cases drawn from the author's experiences in teaching as well as from research towards secondary school teachers in Hong Kong.

## INTRODUCTION

Occupation provides an important source of need satisfaction (Arnold, Robertson, and Cooper, 1993). For example, a job is attractive because of the external rewards it can bring from pay, grades, rewards, obligations and approval. In contrast, a person may be motivated intrinsically when his/her higher levels of needs are met, such as job activities which bring respect, admiration, allows for development of personal potential, competence or means of self-fulfillment. Job satisfaction is of great importance because it is an important domain of life that influence satisfaction (i.e. family, health, community, work and spare time activity etc.).

## STRESS PERCEPTION AND COPING

Some experience of stress and anxiety is normal. Indeed, mild stress can actually be beneficial and produce alertness and interest. Some stress is invited, especially that which produces enjoyment and motivation in work and life (Selye, 1984). However, the level of stress one perceives varies greatly from one person to another (Carver, Weintraub and Scheier, 1989; Fontana, and Abouserie, 1993). If stress is not managed properly, it can damage performance. Prolonged stress and anxiety may lead to physical illnesses (Maslach and Jackson, 1993). Emerging problems and some adaptive coping strategies are discussed.

**Classroom discipline, student violence and apathy.** Most of problems raised by teachers are related to discipline or study problems of students. Problems appear more significant for academically low achieving students. Sometimes these problems manifest themselves as physical or verbal abuse, yet more often they present themselves as minor yet disruptive behaviour which, whilst not immediately

challenging the authority of the teachers, demand the expenditure of inordinate amounts of teacher time and energy. Some teachers may place the blame for behavioural and academic problems on the students' poor standard, inattentiveness and laziness. These teachers become defensive and irritated when confronted by students' misbehaviour, they find it difficult to look hard at themselves, their methods and attitudes. On the other hand, others will reflect and evaluate on their teaching practices to see if they have contributed to the observed problems. Kounin (1970) reported that there is no difference between more and less successful teachers in terms of effectiveness in dealing with behaviour problems, but successful teachers are seen to be far more adept at preventing them. Bull and Solity (1993) have outlined some of the constructive ways to deal with problem behaviours:

- Intervene as early as possible,
- Use the lowest level of intervention necessary, according to the misbehaviour and its effects on learning, relationships and safety,
- Keep the time and attention given to misbehaviours to a minimum,
- Handle misbehaviours in a firm and matter-of-fact way; avoid showing unwanted behaviour for the teacher himself,
- Once dealt with, misbehaviours should be treated as finished; any counselling should take place at other times,
- Use all corrections consistently and fairly,
- Take active steps to teach and maintain appropriate behaviours; use far more rewards than corrections,
- Use misbehaviours as pointers to improvements for one's classroom management.

Teachers find that misbehaved students are mostly under-achievers, they tend to have low self-concept, which often results in a lack of motivation for learning. They often feel insecure and alienated from school. These students respond to failure by focusing even more on their own inadequacy; their attitudes toward assignments may deteriorate even further (Ames, 1985). So, intervention of students' misbehaviour should be non-judgmental to prevent students from retaliating. Students should be guided to learn how to take responsibility of their own actions without the feelings of shame, humiliation and being ridiculed. Feedback also plays a crucial role for the student in defining his or her self-perception of ability. If the performance is satisfactory, future tasks are likely to be approached with confidence (Charlton and David, 1994). Consequently, classroom events shall be tackled systematically and consistently so that students will learn to behave in a desirable manner and be rewarded for doing so. Where behaviour problems arise in schools, it may be difficult to determine or explain precisely why students behave as they do, as behaviours are affected by a whole range of variables, usually in combination. For example, expectations from teachers, parents and the students themselves can be influential. They will reflect the ways in which students predict their own performance level and shape their achievement orientation, actual performance and attribution for success (Yee, 1992). Self-expectation is learned as it depends on previous experiences. It is, in part, influenced by teachers, parents and others, who signal their expectations through their interactions with individuals. Students with learning difficulties tend to have low self-esteem and low expectations of themselves. If expectations from teachers and parents are unrealistic, students may precipitate fears and anxieties within them which cause untold misery and unhappiness, then motivation to learn is lost. However, over permissiveness may also create anxieties, as students may require boundaries or guidelines within which they can act and feel secure (Clarizio and McCoy, 1983).

**Demand on Time.** One of the most frequently cited work-related stress factors is the demand on time. The excessive paperwork duties takes time away from teaching duties. The stress engendered by paperwork is almost certainly related to teachers' perceptions of a lack of professional respect accorded them. Time spent on paperwork is not just inconvenient but is an additional burden on top of an already too busy day. Good time management helps teachers to manage the ever-increasing level and complexity of work demands. Basically, it involves managing oneself and others (Covey, 1989). Teachers are found to achieve satisfaction from their work differently which has an impact on time management. For instances, some teachers consider task satisfaction to stem from carrying out work to a higher standard than other teachers. Not surprisingly, these teachers found it hard to delegate. Similarly, some teachers were only satisfied if the work was as near to perfection as possible. Likewise, these teachers have found it hard to meet deadlines. Still, there are teachers whose social satisfaction comes from solicitous care of students. They may be too keen to offer help to students and others, which take away times for essential tasks. Inability to manage time effectively may cause inconvenience to others, the institution will lose its efficiency. Furthermore, extended working hours will be detrimental to the personal life of the individual. More importantly, it may lead to important tasks being neglected in favour of urgent ones. The enemy of the "best" is often the "good." So, one must keep in mind to be able to say "no" to something if it is not to the apparent, urgent things in life. In essence, effective time management is putting first things first (Covey, Merrill, and Merrill, 1999). In the essay "The Common Denominator of Success" written by E.M. Gray, that the successful person has the habit of doing the things Failures don't like to do, they don't like doing them either necessarily. But their disliking is subordinated to the strength of their purpose (Covey, 1989). Drucker (1954) explained that effective people are not problem-minded, they are opportunity-minded. They feed opportunity and starve problems. They think preventively. They have genuine crises and emergencies that require their immediate attention, but the number is comparatively small because they constantly strike a balance and keep focus on the important, but not urgent, high leverage capacity-building activities. As a consequence, one's effectiveness would increase dramatically. The crises and problems would shrink to manageable proportions because of one's actions in thinking ahead, working on the roots, doing the preventive things that keep situations from developing into crises in the first place.

Furthermore, effective time management requires organization, planning, prioritising, communication, trust and discipline. Plans must be reviewed and adapted in the light of opportunities or difficulties in response to the needs and wants of individuals, families or to possibilities that open up as a result of new developments. Covey (1989) suggested six important criteria to the organisation of time. The first is coherence. Coherence suggests that there is harmony, unity, and integrity between one's vision and mission, roles and goals (both short- and long-term), priorities and plans, desires and discipline. The second is balance. Balance is a tool to keep balance in one's life so that the individual will not neglect important areas such as health, family, professional preparation, or personal development. Covey (1989) stressed that many people seem to think that success in one area can compensate for failure in other areas of life, but can it really? "Perhaps it can for a limited time in some areas. But can success in your profession compensate for a broken marriage, ruined health, or weakness in personal character? True effectiveness requires balance" (p.161). The third is focus. It is a tool that encourages, motivates and actually helps a person spend the time dealing with prevention rather than prioritising crises. The fourth is people. One would need a tool that deals effectively with people, not just schedules. It is focused on effective, synergistic interaction with people. The paradigm is people first, things second. It is leadership first, management second. It is effectiveness first, efficiency second. It is purpose first, structure second. It is vision first, method second. The fifth is flexibility. The planning tool should be the servant instead of one's master. The plan should be tailored to one's own style, needs and particular ways. Finally, the tool should be portable so that it can be carried with the person most of the time within reach and to facilitate constant reviewing.

Teachers have always worked under pressure and for many, today's pressures outweigh their ability to cope with them, resulting in stress related symptoms. In terms of health-related behaviour, when people are under stress, they often do not take proper care of themselves. For example, teachers reported that they frequently take students' assignments and exam papers home to mark. They may skip meals or snack on junk food. People under stress cease normal exercise routines and become sedentary. These behaviours may impact upon the immune system and so reduce the body's ability to fight disease. This behaviour may also affect the general functioning of the body and may contribute to the development of illness. If stress are 'bottled up' for long periods, there are risks of psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, stomach upsets, nervousness, sleep disturbances, depression, fatigue, high blood pressure and skin disorders as reported by many stressed teachers (Cole and Walker, 1989; Travers and Coopers, 1990). Thus, stress may indirectly affect health by reducing positive health behaviours and increasing negative ones.

**Managing Stress through Exercising.** People who have made concerted efforts to improve their physical health and well-being have made great differences to their ability to manage effectively whilst those who do not wish they have addressed the issue earlier. Exercise generates more energy than it uses. Professor Steptoe and his colleagues (The Health Promotion Research Trust, 1989) have found that normal adults benefit psychologically from regular physical activities. Moderate exercise schedule, about 20 minutes of vigorous rhythmic exercise three or four times a week, is enough to reduce tension and anxiety, clear up mental confusion and improves ability to cope with stress. The reason is that although the heart is a muscle, it cannot be exercised directly. It can only exercise through the large muscle groups, particularly the leg muscles. That's why exercises like rapid walking, running, biking, swimming, cross-country skiing, and jogging are so beneficial.

**Coping with the pace of change.** The second factor raised by teachers is the demands as a result of frequent changes in social, technological and educational policies. On the positive end, it has revolutionize communications, video technology creates new teaching techniques and provides an analytical tool to fasten improvement. On the downside, they make current knowledge, skills and values obsolete. They need to take extra time to learn new concepts and techniques, revise curriculum from time to time and subsequently all the notes, worksheets and activities to cater for the changes. Additionally, there are related meetings and paper works associated with proposed changes. Change scares some people because it often begins with feelings of disequilibrium, incompetence and discomfort (Whitaker, 1995). This dissonance leads to a drive to restore equilibrium. Possible consequences are that they reject, suppress and distort their perceptions of reality rather than face the inevitable stress of handling it. So, the major obstacle to the implementation of new policies, goals or methods of operation is the resistance of people to change. Resistance to change comes in two forms—systematic and behavioural (Plant, 1987). Systematic resistance tends to occur when there is a lack of knowledge, information, skill and managerial capacity. Behavioural resistance is more emotionally centred and derives from the reactions, perceptions and assumptions of individuals and groups in the organisation. Lack of trust, for example, is much more difficult to manage than lack of information or the lack of resources. It is suggested that in order to reduce the resistance, the managers should increase participants' levels of involvement and information, listen to the experience of those involved in change and seek to understand what is felt to be threatened. The managers need to be deeply caring and concerned about what it is that staff feel they are having to give up and to be seen as an ally and not as an opponent in the change process. Much pain and discomfort can be avoided if these ideas can be incorporated in the values and assumptions that underpin approaches to management and leadership. A great deal of stress within organisation staff can be traced back to insensitive and clumsy handling of innovation and change.

**Relations with others.** The third factor reported by teachers is connected with interpersonal relationships with their students, co-workers or superiors. There are different beliefs that teachers hold regarding their relations with students. Some teachers believed that teachers should be more authoritative and always keep a distance from the students if they are to effectively manage class discipline. This group of teachers appears to experience frequent confrontations with students (Ormrod, 1995). In comparison, some teachers have adopted a more permissive style, although when necessary, will adopt an authoritative approach. Teachers who adopt a more democratic approach report good student/teacher relationship. In schools where the culture is highly Power oriented facilitates the existence of office politics. Lack of recognition for good teaching, lack of participation in decision-making and a lack of friendly atmosphere among staff characterise the climate in those schools. In this circumstances, if a large reserve of trust is not sustained by continuing deposits, relations between people will deteriorate. Instead of rich, spontaneous understanding and communication, the situation becomes one of accommodations, where people attempt to work independent lifestyle in a fairly tolerant way. The relationship may further deteriorate to one of hostility and defensiveness. The "fight or flight" response creates verbal battles, slammed doors, refusal to talk, emotional withdrawal and self-pity which end up in cold war, endless confess of the sins of one another and a loss/loss political battle. But there really is no quick fix. Building relationships are long-term investments and repairing relationships takes time.

To act effectively in interpersonal contexts, there is a need to develop an understanding of the various forces that affect the ways in which groups of people work together in order to develop an awareness of the options in choosing how to behave towards each other. The development of interpersonal skills involves looking inwards (Covey, 1989). This presupposes that until one can understand oneself, the individual will have difficulties in improving one's relations with others. Requisite qualities are: communication skills, cooperative skills and interpersonal skills. Qualities such as personal warmth and an ability and willingness to project a genuine interest in others, the ability to promote the owning and sharing of personal ideas and feelings with appropriate others, and being receptive to the need of others to do the same are also important. A 'good' interpersonal climate is one that is relatively free of power differentials, competition and unfavourable comparison of one individual with another. However, this is not the usual institutional climate as highlighted by teachers in many educational settings (Dunham, 1992). Teachers who have perceived a lack of personal control as a result of the authority structure feel helpless and are afraid that their efforts to cope will lead to failure, embarrassment and signs of inadequacies. This in turn leaves them with feelings of uncomfortable about not being able to reciprocate, or with the belief that his or her personal control is limited by it. This helps to explain why this group of teachers have reported severe stress level even though they have used a number of constructive stress coping techniques whilst others working in similar environment have reported comparatively less stressful.

**Conflicts in teaching philosophy.** Finally, the tension in the work of teaching is cast in terms of conflicting teaching philosophy and institutional demands (Feiman, and Floden, 1986). From the perspective of the teachers, teaching includes all those aspects directly related to the realization of educational goals: motivating students to learn, assessing knowledge, getting to know them as individuals, etc. Teaching is a balanced system in which all components support and align to each other. Imbalance in the system will lead to a breakdown to poor teaching and surface learning. Non-alignment is signified by inconsistencies, unmet expectations and practices that contradict what a teacher preaches. Many teachers reported that traditional transmission theories of teaching ignore alignment. The common assessment method of determining students' academic achievement is to compare their performance to each other ('norm-referenced'), rather than on whether an individual's learning meets the objectives ('criterion-referenced'). They criticised that school administration and policies from local education authority always dominate the professionalism of teachers. The

assessment criteria fails to project inherent relations between what is taught and what are tested Brown and Knight (1995). They also voiced constraints due to some administrative requirements and resource limitations that make alignment difficult, for example, summative assessment in the form of tests and examinations are often used to discriminate and filter students for promotion to higher education which encourage surface approach to learning.

## CONCLUSION

Job dissatisfaction may produce reactions which are detrimental to the individuals as well as to the organization's aims and objectives (Arnold, Robertson and Cooper, 1993; Edworthy, 2000). If feelings of being anxious are slight, teachers may experience a sense of stimulation and alertness which is pleasurable rather than stressful. Excessive demands may initiate the arousal of higher levels of anxiety. These may be unproductive in the sense that a teacher's ability to make decisions is impaired or the ability to concentrate is reduced. There may be a sharp loss to confidence in teaching. Therefore, the identification of stress in relation to job satisfaction and the way teachers cope with stress is the central theme of this paper. To conclude, on the one hand, teachers are restricted by the institutional climate, the rules and procedures set by administrators, that they have to follow as best as they may. As to the classroom climate, that is more under their control. Most serious problem behaviours demand more time, energy and greater expertise than lesser ones, it seems more sensible, wherever practicable, to prevent problems arising, or less serious ones escalating. In addition, it is also important that the wanted behaviour should be rewarded consistently, firmly and fairly over time. The kind of atmosphere they create --authoritative, democratic, permissive, open, cold and warm -- can remarkably affect the effectiveness of a teaching approach. All aspects of teaching are mutually supportive, each is an integral part of the total system, not an add-on. To align constructively, it is part of the teachers' role to reflect on their present skills and their style in order to analyze and remedy weaknesses for themselves and identify and build upon strengths. Spoon-feeding does the work for the students, so that they have little left to do but obediently swallow.

It is fair that everyone, no matter he is rich or poor, has 24 hours in a day, so, it depends on how efficiently and wisely one can in the use of time. No one can extend the length of life time for an hour more, however, one can adjust the breadth to make it more enriching and fulfilling. People who make efforts to adapt become more resilient to the stresses and strains and they can fight off infections more easily. People who make efforts to change their lifestyles, such as eating the right kinds of foods, getting sufficient rest and relaxation, and exercising on a regular basis, are seen to be more healthy. But individuals who ignore their lifestyles are likely to experience ill health.

Finally, one of the most identifiable constraints affecting teachers' choices of coping strategies is perception of their ability to control. People's perceptions can be vastly different. They have lived with their paradigms for years, thinking they are "facts", and some of them may even question the character or the mental competence of anyone who cannot see the facts. So, if a teacher is very frustrated because his superior is locked into what he feels is an unproductive leadership style, how can he/she transcend the limits of his/her perceptions so that he/she can deeply communicate, and cooperatively deal with the issues and come up with Win/Win solutions? The deepest hunger of the human heart is to be understood. Seeking to understand requires consideration whilst seeking to be understood takes courage. In order to strive for a Win/Win situation, it requires a high degree of both qualities. The essence of achieving synergy is to value differences--to respect them, to build on strengths, to compensate for weaknesses (Covey, Merrill, and Merrill, 1999).

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