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## Teacher Stress: Causes, Stages, and Effects

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## Robinson: Teacher Stress: Causes, Stages, and Effects

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### TEACHER STRESS: CAUSES, STAGES, AND EFFECTS

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Abstract: This article presents a discussion of teacher stress including a definition of stress, the symptoms of stress, and the cause of stress in the classroom, laboratory, and clinical experiences. The three stages of stress are identified as well as the effects stress has on teachers both at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Also discussed are the reactions to stress and suggestions for alleviation of stress. A recommendation is provided in regards to educating vocational educators, especially health occupations teachers, about stress.

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Vocational educators are being constantly bombarded with more and more tasks and responsibilities. This is particularly true of health occupations teachers who are responsible not only for their classes, but are equally responsible for the behavior of their students in classroom laboratories and other training sites, such as hospitals, nursing homes, primary health care centers, dental offices and laboratories, and physician offices. These individuals must have the assurance that their students have the expertise

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stress and its causes and effects on teachers can be examined, stress must be understood in its basic form. According to Penny (1982), the result is an imbalance between the demands of an environment as opposed to one's capacity to respond (Wangberg, 1982). This imbalance, whether stemming from real or imagined causes, is directly related to one's reaction, either positive or negative, dependent on one's perception and reactions to the demand or stressor.

Stress for each individual is a complexity within itself. If stress is an equilibrium state between the individual and responses to environmental demands, then stressors may be defined as events requiring more than usual adaptive responses from the body. Stressors are commonly associated with a variety of personal, social, and physical events, including interpersonal experiences in schools or classrooms (Fimian, 1982). The human body, however, does not have the capacity to differentiate between the various types of **stressors**. This explains why physical stress cannot be separated from mental stress, just as personal stress cannot be separated from professional stress (Wangberg, 1982). Because individual responses to and discernments of similar situations vary significantly, factors responsible for stress in one person **may** also be responsible for sparking enthusiasm in another (Fimian, 1982; Forbes, 1979; and Pemy, 1982). Moreover, teachers should be aware of some of the symptoms of stress.

#### Symptoms of Stress

Symptoms of teacher stress are almost as varied as the individuals themselves. Since stages of stress are related to the symptoms of stress, most stress manifests itself in one of three ways: attitude, physical well being, or performance. A general feeling of dissatisfaction about one's work is a common, low-key indicator of stress. The school may no longer

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required to perform technical skills associated with the care of others. Health care educators and administrators must be ever cognizant of the activities in which teachers are involved and which may produce stress. Questions pondered year after year may include but are not limited to those listed below:

1. Are sensitive, dedicated teachers leaving their profession because of an increasing number of assignments associated with teaching?
2. Are decisions to vacate classrooms based upon the inability of individual teachers to cope with stressors that have become synonymous with teaching, such as large class sizes, disruptions, low salaries, increasing amounts of paperwork, lack of materials, and violence?
3. Are teachers simply lacking the intrinsic rewards that they once envisioned from their careers?
4. Is there something fundamentally wrong in educational environments, causing a low morale which may possibly lead to stress among the teaching force?

Stress, although not necessarily a negative force, is an integral part of life. Reaction to various stressors is directly correlated to the effects stress has on individuals. Too little stress yields boredom; yet, too much stress has the potential for producing serious physical and mental disorders (Wangberg, 1982). The spectrum of stress is almost infinite and ranges from energizing to depletion, known as burnout (Fimian, 1982; Forbes, 1979; and Penny, 1982).

### Stress: A Definition

Stress as defined by Random House Thesaurus (Stein & Flexner, 1984) is "strain, tension, anxiety, and force." Whereas, Jones and Emanuel (1981) raised the question: Is stress another term for teaching? However, before

seem to be a friendly environment (Jones & Emanuel, 1981) and a feeling of being isolated from the real world may ensue (Fimian, 1982; Jones & Emanuel, 1981). Teachers may worry in excess, become anxious over routine matters, or blame others for their problems. A direct result is that teaching priorities change from one of placing the most importance on learning to one of self-survival. Classroom performance and methodology are given a somewhat lower priority (Fimian, 1982; McMillen, 1987; and Penny, 1982). Thus, secondary and postsecondary teachers should be aware of some of the personal and professional factors which cause stress.

#### Stress Related to Personal Factors

Personal **stressors**, despite their intensity, have to be dealt with in the life of each teacher. It may be as simple as balancing a checkbook or wearing a pair of shoes that hurt to more severe **stressors**, such as death, divorce, or accident (Block, 1977). A teacher's perception of the capacity to communicate either socially or professionally is closely related to feelings of frustration (Wangberg, 1982). When personal stress becomes coupled with other types of stress, the main health problem among teachers may be stress related (Block, 1977).

#### Stress Related to Professional Factors

Professional **stressors** among secondary teachers tend to be divided into four basic sources: (a) working conditions, (b) professional responsibilities, (c) student teacher situations, and (d) student discipline. These topics are discussed in the following sections.

Working conditions. Because self-fulfillment is thought to be the ultimate satisfier for most teachers, many attempt to relieve some tension associated with poor working conditions. By creating pleasant environments within their classrooms, these individuals are striving to satisfy a need

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for belonging and self worth. A problem with this theory arises, however, in view of today's educational systems. While teachers have continued to be involved despite low pay scales and less than satisfactory working environments, their enthusiasm has been dampened by overloads of paper work and oversized classes. Furthermore, evaluation has become a threat instead of an instrument for helping teachers grow professionally (Krupp & Dempsey, 1982; Penny, 1982).

Individuals in health related fields are acutely at risk for stress. In addition to the normal stressors such as keeping track of tremendous volumes of paper work that other teachers face, health occupations teachers, particularly at the postsecondary, level must prepare their students to deal with potential life-threatening situations. Health occupations educators **must** be able to assure those who work with their students that the students are capable of performing skills required under the necessary conditions. In essence, these teachers are not only responsible for their performance as educators, but for the performance of their students as well.

Professional responsibilities. In addition to low salaries, limited professional advancement opportunities exist at the secondary level. A disheartening scenario evolves when the relationship between professional preparation, length of the work day or week, and complexity of services rendered and individuals served is compared with pay scale and promotion potential in most school systems. Also, often lacking is incentive in the form of recognition for good work; therefore, the development of any sense of pride in their work or any degree of achievement often becomes the responsibility of the individual teacher (Kaiser, 1982; Penny, 1982).

Few opportunities are afforded teachers, even those who have preparation periods, to recuperate from daily activities (Alschuler, 1980).

Although classrooms may be lacking adequate materials, teachers are expected to maintain quiet classrooms while remaining apprised of recent announcements, fire drill procedures, field trips, and student absenteeism. These tasks are expected to be performed besides the routine duties associated with teaching (Styles, 1977). Frequently, safety against physical assaults is not afforded teachers (Jones & Emanuel, 1981), especially in inner city schools. Block (1977) cites numerous examples of cases in which teachers are attacked, beaten, or abused either while teaching or performing a job related activity. The same individuals either receive a reprimand for not being in control of these situations or are warned against talking about the incident. In either situation, no support is given to the battered teachers who are threatened verbally or are robbed (Block, 1977).

Teaching responsibilities, also sources of stress among the educational work force, are thought to be due, in part, to the fact that teachers have little input into administrative decisions (Fimian, 1982). Although tangible rewards are few, teachers are expected to perform too many tasks and responsibilities in too little time. These tasks include too many classes, large classes, supervisory duties, activities after school, mixed ability groups, and administrative paperwork (Penny, 1982). Teachers often work with students numbering more than 150 per day with each student having different learning styles, personalities, problems, and potentials (Altschuler, 1980).

Student-teacher situations. Another source of stress is student demands on teachers' time. Essentially there are two categories of student related stress: student-teacher relationships and discipline problems. Relationships between students and teachers are an essential part of the

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educational process, particularly at the secondary level. The knowledge that individual needs of each student cannot be met is a primary ingredient in teacher-related stress. Declining relationships with students coupled with frequent changes in curricula and teaching methods become additional stressors to already frustrated teachers (Styles, 1977).

Student discipline. Student discipline is *also* a constant source of teacher stress. Every day each teacher faces as many as 30 to 60 interruptions in each class. Encounters with students which range from asking irrelevant questions and talking with other students to throwing things and insulting others add to feelings of helplessness. These actions **may** account for **50%** of instructional periods being devoted *to* correcting behavior problems (Alschuler 1980). Poor attitudes among students, lack of student motivation and inadequate support from administration are frequently cited as contributing factors to teacher stress (Penny, 1982). **Feitler** and Tokar (1982) found that the few students who chronically misbehave produce greater levels of stress than general behavior problems.

### College Faculty Stress

Although college faculty may face similar stressors that secondary teachers deal with, these individuals experience a type of stress unique to university positions. Stress related to work and high expectation is discussed in the following sections.

Work-related. University level faculties feel the time pressure as they attempt to juggle preparing for classes, conducting research, writing manuscripts, and planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating preservice and inservice workshops, seminars, and conferences. The consequence **is** very little time left for family, thereby causing stress levels to continuously rise (McMillen, 1987).

Specifically, the stressful nature of academic careers is linked to tougher competition, lessened mobility, limited resources, and growth in part-time positions. As the standards for promotion and tenure become more stringent, travel and departmental funds are often reduced. This means fewer sabbaticals and research grants are awarded. Faculty members at this level have even fewer opportunities for job change than their secondary counterparts. This is due to an increase in part-time positions being created at the expense of tenure-track positions being eliminated. Professors, hence, feel imprisoned in their work (McMillen, 1987).

High expectations. In addition, extremely high expectation of university faculty by both the individual and the university system lead to higher levels of tension. Professors are usually perfectionists and are trained to be critical. **As** a consequence, the tone in academic arenas tends to become negative. Levels of individual expectations rise sharply as competition among colleagues becomes extremely keen and self-evaluation is most acute just prior to decisions concerning tenure and promotion. However, stress does not end with the granting of tenure. With tenure come additional pressures to maintain a hard-won reputation. Such tension is especially difficult for women who often shoulder the burden of raising a family (McMillan, 1987).

#### Stages of Stress

Literature indicates that three distinct levels, or stages of stress exist. Each stage becomes progressively more difficult to handle. The three stages are referred to as (a) alarm stage, (b) resistance stage, and (c) exhaustion stage. These stages are explained in the following sections.

Alarm stage. The first stage, the alarm stage, is signaled simply by an awareness that **stressors** exist. Feelings of uneasiness or tension are

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usually indicative of this stage. If allowed to proceed unimpeded, this leads to feelings of helplessness, rejection, and dissatisfaction (Jones & Emanuel, 1981). The occurrence of weak **stressors** may be so subtle that an individual may not be aware of their initial existence. Psychological or physical ailments associated with this stage of stress may include sudden nervousness, irritability, or frequent headaches (Fimian, 1982).

Resistance stage. The second stage, the resistance stage, is to endure the stress until it progresses into a state of exhaustion. Commonly associated with this stage of stress are coping strategies. A teacher experiencing this type of stress usually employs one of the following coping strategies: (a) flee the situation or (b) tolerate the situation until a more advanced stage of stress develops. If the former strategy is employed, a victim may put things off indefinitely, avoid the issue, or simply ignore the problem. Or, if the latter strategy, better known as passive coping, is put into place, the victim may identify the problem but do nothing about it for a variety of reasons. The danger of this method lies in the fact that the **symptoms** of stress are dealt with, but the root of the problem causing the stress is ignored. This can lead to more extreme coping measures such as alcohol or drug abuse (Fimian, 1982).

Exhaustion stage. The final and most serious stage is the exhaustion stage. This stage is better known as the burnout or breakdown stage. The individual no longer has the physical or psychological reserve wherewith to fight. Extreme ailments, such as ulcers, migraine headaches, and varying degrees of depression are typical (Fimian, 1982).

### Reaction to Stress

The reaction of an individual to a stressed situation is the determining factor in the manner that stress manifests itself. Severity for

each parallels the coping capacity of each individual. An activity or situation that produces opportunity for one has potential for producing stress for another (Forbes, 1979). This could provide the reasoning for younger teachers experiencing a different type of frustration than more seasoned teachers, for male teachers having negative feelings more frequently than **females**, or for high school teachers feeling more negatively toward their students and career than their postsecondary counterparts (Feitler & Tokar, 1982; Schwab, 1982).

#### Alleviating Stress

Reducing or alleviating stress begins with awareness of factors that are most prone to causing stress. Teachers should be continuously aware of early symptoms of stress. Situations that yield high stress levels should be avoided. Teachers, who fear evaluations, cover the greatest possible amount of material, or feel overwhelmed with deadlines, are more subject to stress. Self-expectations often become increasingly difficult to meet. Some teachers habitually overextend themselves and deliberately place themselves in high stress situations. The result is stress (Fimian, 1982).

#### Summary

Teachers, especially health occupations teachers, are being given more and more responsibilities today in the classroom as well as in the clinical experience with their students in the **health** care agencies. With these increasing stressors, educators, and administrators must ever be cognizant of response behavior in the teaching and clinical environment, and constantly observe actions, reactions, and performance of not only their own but their subordinates. Administrators, as well as individual teachers, should be continuously raising questions such as: Are teachers leaving the

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classroom for other jobs? Are teachers lacking intrinsic rewards? What can be done to assist in alleviating problems of stress?

As the definition of stress is explored, one author reported that it is an imbalance between the demands of an environment as opposed to one's capacity to respond (Wangberg, 1982). Moreover, this imbalance, whether stemming from real or imagined causes, is directly related to **one's** reaction, either positive or negative, dependent on one's perception and reactions to the demand or stressor.

Stress related to professional factors include working conditions, professional responsibilities, student teacher situations, and student discipline. College faculty stress seems to center around work related and high expectations that are both self and university imposed. These factors coupled with family or personal factors can increase tension and add to the **stressors** in the work environment.

Stages of stress include the first stage, or alarm stage, which is simply an awareness that stressors exist. The second, or the resistance stage, is to shoulder the stress and use coping strategies such as tolerating or escaping stressful situations. The third stage is the exhaustion stage, better known as burnout or breakdown stage. At this point the individual no longer has the physical or psychological reserve to fight. As a result, medical problems such as headaches, ulcers, and varying degrees of depression may be evident.

The severity for each stage of stress parallels the coping capacity of stress for each individual. A situation that produces stress for one teacher may yield an opportunity for another. Different types of frustration may be evident in young teachers versus seasonal teachers as well as males versus females.

The symptoms of stress as explained vary from one to another and are related to the various stages. However, stress manifests itself in one of three ways: attitude, physical well-being, and performance. Health care teachers, administrators, and educators should be continuously aware of the early symptoms of stress, and if possible, avoid those situations which yield the high stressors and/or learn effective coping strategies through stress-related workshops, inservice, or special courses.

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