

Teachers, It's Time To Talk About Your Stress



contributed by **Tara Brown**

As a certified massage therapist for over two decades, in addition to my roles as a teacher and coach, I have seen first-hand the impact of stress on the body.

Some research has shown that as many as 75–90 percent of primary care physician visits are due to stress-related problems. This is a significant problem to address, especially in the education profession: recent studies have shown that educators have higher rates of stress and depression when compared to the general population, and 67 percent of teachers stated that their stress level increased during the course of the 2016–17 school year, an alarming trend. Now more than ever, educators at all levels need a clear, proactive approach to handling and managing stress.

I often hear educators explain that they just don't have time to work out or engage in other stress management activities. But, as the CEO—Chief Emotional Officer—of the classroom, we set the mood and create the climate. Our stress management, or lack thereof, doesn't affect only our health: there are implications for every student in our care. Put simply, we can't afford to ignore opportunities to reduce our stress.

When I was still in the classroom, I certainly had times that I didn't do as good of a job carving out "me time." What I found was that the more stressed I was, the less patience I had with my students and colleagues. Heck, our own spouses, partners, kids, and pets become far less adorable as our stress levels increase!

Part of great leadership—and, believe me, every educator in the school is a leader—is doing everything possible to be the best version of ourselves, day in and day out. Modeling self-care and taking definitive steps to maintain a healthy lifestyle will ensure that our bodies are fighting the impact of stress, giving us the best opportunity to remain disease-free and to have a positive impact on our peers and students.

Why now is the time to get started

There is a mile of blood vessels in every pound of fat. A MILE. It requires a lot of effort for your heart to pump blood through that vast network, even in the best of circumstances. Unfortunately, according to data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination survey, two in three U.S. adults are considered overweight or obese. Even five pounds of extra fat can increase blood pressure and stress on the heart, so reversing this trend can go a long way.

Stress is a major factor in weight gain so, when it comes to managing stress and its related health challenges, addressing stress and weight together is a great place to start. Acknowledge your starting point, as well as your goals for a few months down the road.

If you're not yet convinced of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle—complete with consistent exercise, nourishing food, and supportive relationships—and the relevance of these factors to success in your professional life, take a quick look at just a few:

- Lower blood pressure
- Improved sleep, digestion, mood, and energy
- Strengthened immune system
- Stronger heart and bones
- Improved focus, patience, and productivity

Consider this your official “kick in the pants” from my size 11s—trust me, once you get started, you will be so glad you did. Each and every one of these benefits, on its own, can increase your professional and personal success. Combined, they have the power to change your entire outlook and sense of satisfaction in the work you do every day.

What speaks to you? Find it and try it!

There was a group of about seven teachers I knew who started a walking club that met three days a week after school. Their goals were to get exercise, lose weight, and *laugh*...each a powerful component of stress reduction. One teacher told me, “Those three days of walking with my friends are the only thing sometimes that keeps me off the evening news!” Although she was being humorous, looking forward to the time with colleagues to walk, talk, and laugh was truly a powerful support tool to get her through stressful days.

That's one example, where a group of teachers found what worked for them, but there are many other activities proven to reduce stress. Yoga, exercise, art, meditation, journaling, volunteering, spending time in nature, finding opportunities for laughter, taking a long bath, or numerous other activities and hobbies can all help. What's important is to find what it is that speaks to you and that gives you enjoyment, and to get started.

The key to beginning and sustaining your plan is to schedule activities just like you do with other appointments. It has to be scheduled in and we have to hold that chunk of time to the highest priority. Many educators struggle with feeling like it is selfish to take

that time for themselves. Just as going to a doctor's appointment isn't selfish, neither should participation in activities to reduce stress and maintain a healthy body. These are essential. Once we are all able to change our perspective on the value and importance of "me time," getting started and being consistent gets much easier.

Many years when I was teaching, I would take a gym bag to school with me, with the understanding that I wouldn't leave the school in the afternoon without changing into my workout clothes. It was this intention that forced me to hold myself accountable. And, coincidentally (or perhaps not), the days that I was kicking and screaming inside because I didn't want to go were the exact times that I needed a workout the most. It's up to each of us, as individuals, to hold ourselves accountable and make sure the "me time" on the schedule is sacred. We must avoid excuses and ensure nothing interferes.

"Draw the line" to establish a stress reduction plan

Once you've thought about your unique stress reduction plan, it's time to activate it. Here are some steps I recommend, based on my own experience:

- *Acknowledge the importance of your stress reduction plan*—Think about how important it is to take control of stress reduction and think through the role it will play in your professional and personal lives. Consider all the benefits!
- *Honestly address areas of your life that need improving*—It may be getting rid of toxic relationships, improving your diet, finding time for more exercise, or rekindling a love for some hobbies that once gave you joy. Whatever it is, don't be afraid to take it on directly.
- *Create a schedule that carves out and schedules "me time"...guilt free*—Once you're clear on your direction, put it on the calendar and hold that time as your line in the sand. Know that when you consistently engage in your stress reduction activities, you are helping to create the best version of yourself. This enables you to be the leader that your students deserve and ensures that modeling self-care will inspire others to follow suit.

Whatever you decide, it should be about what speaks to you. But, as the research shows (and as you've no doubt learned from your own experience in this stressful profession), it is important that we all take action. I'm sending you my wishes for success stress reduction and my encouragement to get started!

Tara Brown, known as "The Connection Coach," is an award-winning educator, author and international speaker. Tara's 30-year professional journey as a teacher and coach has taken her coast to coast from rural Florida to urban schools in California and to one of the largest high schools in Tennessee, with over 40 countries represented. In 2005, in Nashville, TN, Tara played a key role in piloting a Leadership Development program at Antioch High School targeting nontraditional leaders. Because of the success of this program, it expanded to all high schools in Davidson County and earned Tara the 'Pioneer Award' and 'Teacher of the Year' award in 2006. She holds a Master's degree in Administration and Supervision and is a nationally certified Personal Trainer. Follow Tara on twitter @tarambrown