

# Introduction

There is no doubt that there are problems recruiting and retaining teachers at all stages of education. There are many possible reasons for this, including workload, bureaucracy, too many changes over too short a space of time, difficulties with badly-behaved pupils, violent and abusive parents and the low status of the profession. There are also, however, many views that suggest that teachers are not alone in working hard and in difficult circumstances, and that their conditions of service are better than other sections of both public services and private industry. But there is one major problem that increasingly affects those working in education, and that is stress. In fact, stress is one of the most important issues facing education today and the ability of teachers and other adults working in school to meet the demands being placed on them is severely hampered by stress.

It should not be thought that stress is the problem of a few neurotic individuals, because it is an organisational as well as a personal issue. In other words, both the teacher as an individual and the school have to make sure that they are aware of what stress is and what kind of action needs to be taken to reduce it to manageable levels. Whatever stress is, there is a cost to each person. It not only affects teachers' professional lives; home life is also blighted by what can become a debilitating illness that affects the individual and those around him or her. Stress can become even more of an illness if it is thought that it is a weakness and that an individual is failing if they feel stressed. These problems are compounded if it is thought that there is a magic wand that can eliminate stress. This isn't going to happen. In fact, there is no way to avoid stress. It is part of everyday life and a natural part of the body's functions, which actually helps in times when you need extra energy, such as in an emergency situation.

Too much stress is damaging – so damaging, in fact, that breakdowns can be the end result. This must be avoided if the teaching profession is going to improve and if teachers are going to continue to want to work in schools.

There are three parts to this pack, as outlined below:

- 1 **Identifying stress** – This covers the symptoms and how we as individuals can help to manage stress.
- 2 **Organisational stress** – This section examines the reasons for stress in schools, how organisational stress can be minimised and the key factors in creating a stress-free school.
- 3 **Creating a stress-free existence** – There are certain lifestyles which should reduce stress. This section looks very briefly at health and relaxation and concentrates on healthy and happy eating, with a selection of 'stress-reducing' recipes.

Once you have completed the chart, you should have identified every event over the last year that is likely to have caused you stress. If you have experienced severe stress over this period, with scores of 250 or greater, even with normal stress tolerance, you may be over-stressed. People with low stress tolerance may even be over-stressed with scores as low as 150. For most people, however, a score of 150-250 means that you are in danger of being stressed, to the point that you ought to be concerned. Scores of 150 or less suggest that stress is at a manageable level.

## Over-stress

Over-stress makes you ill. It is like leaving the toaster on without allowing the bread to pop up, or running your car with the revs over the red line all the time. Sooner or later something will break down.

The most common symptoms of over-stress are listed here. Stress might affect:

- **the brain** – This might involve fatigue, aches and pains, crying spells, depression, anxiety attacks, sleep disturbance
- **the gastrointestinal tract** – Including ulcers, cramps, diarrhoea, colitis and/or irritable bowel syndrome
- **the glandular system** – This is usually thyroid gland malfunction
- **the cardiovascular system** – Including high blood pressure, heart attack, abnormal heart beat or a stroke
- **the skin** – Including skin rashes and allergic reactions
- **the immune system** – Including a reduced resistance to infections.

For a more specific definition of stress we need to relate it to the pressures of teaching and of working with pupils in school. Pressure, of course, is not always a bad thing. In fact, success in many areas of work will depend on some level of pressure. This can range from deadlines to solving a difficult problem in a short space of time. Pressure becomes excessive if you feel that you are not able to cope. The symptoms of stress that result from this kind of pressure may include:

- An increased consumption of stimulants, such as alcohol and cigarettes
- A change in eating habits, including over-eating
- Poor time-keeping
- Increased absence
- Becoming more accident prone
- Strained personal relationships
- Increased irritability
- Anxiety and depression
- Difficulty in maintaining concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Lethargy
- Increased level of aches, pains and colds
- Headaches and migraines.

## Life stress test

Read each of the questions below and circle the letter next to the answer that applies to you. When you have finished, follow the scoring guide on page 8.

- 1 Colleagues are discussing you. Which of the following statements would they be most likely to use?
  - a S/He is very together – nothing seems to affect them
  - b S/He is great, but you have to be careful what you say to him/her at times
  - c Something always seems to be going wrong with his/her life
  - d I find him/her quite moody and unpredictable
  - e The less I see of him/her the better
  
- 2 Are any of the following common features of your life? (Circle as many as necessary.)
  - a Feeling you can seldom do anything right
  - b Poor appetite
  - c Indigestion
  - d Feelings of being hounded, trapped and cornered
  - e Panic feelings in crowds or confined spaces
  - f Difficulty in getting to sleep at night
  - g Sweating or a rise in temperature without any exertion
  - h Dizzy spells or palpitations
  - i Faintness or nausea sensations
  - j Tiredness and lack of energy
  - k Feelings of hopelessness, such as 'What's the use of anything?'
  - l Extreme irritation over quite small things
  - m Inability to stop thinking about problems or the day's events
  - n Lack of enthusiasm for cherished interests
  - o Inability to say 'No' when asked to do something
  - p Reluctance to meet new people and attempt new experiences
  - q Convictions that you just cannot cope
  - r Tearfulness
  - s Difficulty in making decisions
  - t Inability to unwind in the evenings
  - u Having more responsibility than you can handle
  - v Waking regularly at night or early in the mornings
  
- 3 Are you more or less optimistic than you used to be, or about the same?
  - a More
  - b About the same
  - c Less

- **Sleep properly** and for the appropriate length of time. Most people need between six and nine hours sleep every night. Often, when you are under stress, you either stop sleeping to do more work or you cannot sleep because you are thinking about the problems that have caused the stress in the first place. If you cannot sleep, try the following strategies:
  - Make a mental list of all the things you have to be thankful for.
  - Exercise during the evening.
  - Do not drink coffee, tea or other drinks with caffeine in during the evening.
  - Have a warm bath before going to bed.
  - Go to bed at the same time every evening.
- **Remind yourself** of what you have accomplished during the day and during the past week.
- **Listen to music.** Quiet soothing music may help you relax.
- **Keep fit.** This is a key component in making changes to routines and ways of approaching problems. You do not need to join a gym – just a brisk walk can help.
- **Learn to play** and occasionally escape from the pressures of life and have fun. Find pastimes which are absorbing and enjoyable to you, no matter what your level of ability is.
- **Learn to tolerate and forgive**, because intolerance of others can lead to frustration and anger.
- **Avoid unnecessary competition.** There are many competitive situations in life that we cannot avoid. Too much concern with winning in too many areas of life can create excessive tension and anxiety, as well as making us unnecessarily aggressive.
- **Talk out your troubles**, because ‘bottled up’ tension causes worry, anxiety and stress.
- **Eat well**, eat relatively healthily, and most of all share a meal with a friend so that you can relax and talk at the same time as you are enjoying the tastes and smells of good cooking.

## Good cooking

There is a cliché that you are what you eat and there is certainly a need for many people to eat more healthily, by using more pulses, more salads, more fruit, less meat, etc. Changing raw ingredients into a tasty meal is not difficult. It should not be a chore, but a relaxing part of your leisure time. It can be creative, colourful, challenging, relaxing and therapeutic. What’s more, it is a way of sharing your creativity with a friend and grabbing back a sociable and happy part of your life.

Having said that, no one wants or needs to come home every day and have to cook. Preparing a meal should be something you look forward to. If you don’t want to do it, don’t – get something out of the freezer, buy a takeaway or go out to eat. However, do not assume that these suggestions are particularly healthy. They are tasty, but you will need to consult more widely about nutrition and what you should be eating if you are to stay fit and beat all the viruses and diseases that are lying in wait for us.

The following pages list some recipes to try. Those who suffer from food intolerances should check the ingredients before embarking on the recipes.