

Under PRESSURE

Stress comes with the territory for a teacher, right? Well, possibly. But according to performance psychologist **Miranda Banks**, there are things we can do to stop things spiralling out of control...

“**T**eacher hit pupil over beard taunts”, read a Daily Telegraph headline at the end of March. Regardless of the details of the case – and I should note that the teacher denied the allegations – instances like these are a constant reminder of the stresses and anxieties too common in the profession.

Beyond the anecdotal, figures from the Health and Safety Executive report a worryingly high percentage of teachers describing themselves as ‘highly stressed’.

I work as a performance coach with Exam Confidence, and although traditionally my courses have been run for students, we’re increasingly being asked to help teachers, helping manage levels of anxiety and stress and developing techniques and programmes that allow them to handle the psychological challenges of the career.

Confrontation’s key

Fundamentally, those facing high stress situations should, where possible, adopt a dual approach, looking to tackle both the cause of the anxiety and their capacity to deal with it.

Causes will vary greatly from one professional to the next, and the most significant factor may come from outside of the school gates. That said, schools are unique social environments and the relationships that teachers have, either with students or other members of staff, can very often underpin anxiety.

If a relationship breakdown is causing stress it needs to be tackled head on. It may sound counter-intuitive but we very often find that it’s individuals who let things wash over them, those who refuse to confront the problem, who suffer the most. There should be a clear line between an aggressive and an assertive approach, but it’s those who recognise an issue and take positive steps to deal with it, who are best placed.

Teachers, though, when they’ve addressed a relationship challenge, must be sure to enforce their position. That might be with the support of another member of staff, but equally valid is enforcement through scheduled meetings

41.5%

NUMBER OF TEACHERS REPORTING THEMSELVES TO BE ‘HIGHLY STRESSED’ ACCORDING TO FIGURES FROM ENGLAND’S HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE

with a student to rebuild a damaged relationship.

I’ve too often worked with teachers who’ve been delighted at an improved relationship and the impact it’s had on their well-being, only to see the ‘bad old days’ return as student behaviour standards are allowed to slip. Something as simple as agreeing a brief weekly or fortnightly chat, at least initially, is an ideal way of entrenching an improved relationship.

Tackling the problem

Clearly, though, not all teachers who suffer from stress do so as a result of one or two difficult students. The physical causes of anxiety are too wide and wonderful to list (and of course, in some cases anxiety goes beyond physical causes) but what’s important is that the individual is, wherever possible, able to think quietly and calmly on what it is that’s the root cause.

That cause may be as seemingly mundane as a classroom being too small or crowded. It may be the pressure of an impending Ofsted inspection. Whatever it is, identifying it – and it’s staggering how many aren’t able to do so when directly asked – is the first step in tackling it. Only from that point is it possible to construct a positive response.

And again, though it may sound obvious, simply deciding on a positive response is hugely beneficial in itself. The alternative is what we refer to as ‘learned helplessness’ – a kind of habitual, passive acceptance of whatever pressures are put upon us. That feeling only compounds anxiety, making it harder and harder to tackle the root cause.

Practical solutions

So once we’ve identified the cause and are willing to take action, what kind of ideas can we consider? Of course, there’s no catch-all solution. A lot of teachers I work with value the urgent/non-urgent, important/non-important matrix, simply for handling the pressure of sudden workloads. It’s a well-practised concept and a great way of visualising priorities.

Some techniques are often dismissed as lightweight but, when used properly, can have excellent results. A candlelit bubble-bath might sound a terrible cliché, but when you

consciously use it as a means to de-stress, what I call getting 'back to zero', it's perfectly legitimate. Whatever you do, you need to value that activity as a positive action, not just a short-term escape. The latter means the problem's still there, waiting, the former means you're prepared to handle it.

Exercise is another classic that, for being too often recommended without much thought, is now undervalued as a means of tackling stress. It might not be physically relaxing but it will be mentally - in the bubble-bath mode, offering a means to get 'back to zero'.

Quite simply, exercise also prompts physical changes in our bodies. We release endorphins, natural tranquilisers that boost our sense of wellbeing, a commodity that can't be undervalued when it comes to handling high pressure situations. Of course, we can't constantly be on treadmills, desperately seeking an endorphin boost to regulate our mood, but regular exercise will leave us in a far better position to handle specific issues when they come about.

Support matters

The ideas above are isolationist in that they only involve you dealing with the problem. It's hugely important, though, to involve a network of support; one that readily provides advice and guidance both pre-emptively and in reaction to a specific problem.

Teachers are in a good position, given the structures of schools, to go to either heads of department or others in a management position. In doing so, they should be entirely open about what it is they're looking for. In the schools with which we work (and in all walks of life, in fact) mentoring structures work fantastically well. Both parties understand what's expected of them, and regular contact means problems are recognised early. Surprisingly, it's very often others who first recognise that we're under strain and not performing to our best.

A good mentor will know us well and spot those symptoms early. Once they've done that, it's also very likely that, if they're well chosen, they will be able to offer practical solutions. Very few situations are entirely unique and, in most cases, those with a good number of years in the profession will have experienced a particular challenge before.

The bigger picture

Finally, it's worth remembering that our psychological wellbeing is singular. We don't have one for work, one for home, one for our social lives. Issues affecting one particular area of activity will, at some point, have an impact on all the others. Sweeping a home life issue under the rug, because we think we can, for the sake of school responsibilities (or vice-versa), will, at best, be a short-term solution.

We need to be as honest as possible with ourselves as to what is causing us concern. If an issue in one area of lives is left unaddressed, the chances are that, at some stage, it will have an impact on our performance in another. Confronting challenges as soon as possible, therefore, is key.

Whatever the specifics, though, teachers need to recognise that in almost every case there is action that can be taken to address stress or anxiety. Simply deciding to act is an excellent first step and, when the actions are appropriate, the results can be very good indeed.



ABOUT THE EXPERT

MIRANDA BANKS IS A QUALIFIED PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGIST, WHO, IN HER ROLE WITH EXAM CONFIDENCE, WORKS WITH SCHOOLS ACROSS THE UK. MIRANDA SUPPORTS TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE, MANAGING STRESS, AND OVERCOMING PERSONAL CHALLENGES.

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EARLY WARNINGS

SOMETIMES IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNISE WHEN OUR OWN STRESS LEVELS ARE GETTING OUT OF HAND. SOME OF THE SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR INCLUDE:

- > **An almost constant feeling of irritability.** Everyday frustrations that usually would be met and managed easily instead trigger over-the-top reactions.
- > **An often-inexplicable propensity to want to cry.**
- > **Disrupted sleep – difficulty falling asleep or punctuated sleep, often with unsettling dreams.**
- > **A sense of feeling overwhelmed.** This can be evidenced by missed deadlines; work not attempted; work performance that is not up to usual standards.
- > **Deteriorating relationships inside and outside of school.**
- > **Deteriorating self-esteem and belief in self to be able to meet challenges and opportunities.**

