

The New Teacher's Survival Guide to Behaviour

2nd Edition

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You and Your Resources

This chapter will:

- Help you understand what you need to be on top of the job
- Identify ways in which you can enhance your personal resources and resilience
- Encourage you to think about how best to manage time as a finite resource
- Consider what you can do to promote resilience for students.



Introduction

This chapter is about stress and resilience. Although it applies to you as a teacher read it with your students in mind as well. Children and young people who are hard to manage in school have either not yet learnt what is appropriate for school or their behaviour is a reflection of their vulnerability and the need to protect themselves in some way, sometimes a combination of both. Other than teach required behaviour in a systematic and supportive way, the best thing we can do is help these pupils be resilient (Benard, 2004). Factors in resilience include:

- Having someone who values you, who seeks the best in you
- High expectations – not being written off
- Feeling you belong – and having opportunities to participate in your community
- A positive outlook on life and sense of humour
- Problem-solving skills
- Willingness to talk about issues
- Persistence – not giving up as soon as things don't go well.

 Reflection point

Some of the factors in resilience are personal and some are environmental. What factors in your own school experience promoted or inhibited resilience?

The outcomes of stress

A certain level of stress can be motivating, energising and productive. Stress only becomes a problem when demands exceed resources to meet them. Teaching takes a lot out of you. It makes demands on your time, physical energy, creativity, and the ability to think on your feet. It can also drain your emotional resources. You will be more able to respond thoughtfully and effectively to challenges in the classroom if your own resources are kept topped up. The best laid plans, good intentions and positive relationships will just disintegrate if you are feeling so stressed that all you can manage is knee jerk reactions. Such reactions usually exacerbate difficulties and may set you up for negative expectations in the future. This chapter looks at ways to keep demands within sensible boundaries and how to identify and maximise your available resources so as to remain on an even keel. On the surface it might seem that your life outside school has nothing to do with how effectively you respond to student behaviour. In reality it has everything to do with your survival in challenging circumstances. The same principles are also true of your students.

It is now widely accepted that there are strong links between physical and psychological wellbeing. You are more likely to become ill if you find your working environment emotionally stressful and to be emotionally drained if you are feeling tired and under par. You need to give yourself every chance to develop optimum resilience.

Physical resources

You have a better chance of getting through the day, and especially facing a hard class if you look after yourself well. Good quality sleep, keeping healthy and time for relaxation all make a difference to your survival in school.

Staying healthy

Some people are lucky enough to have an iron constitution but we can all maximise our optimum levels of fitness and energy. Trying to give a

stimulating lesson when you feel like death warmed up is really difficult. Taking lots of time off with colds and viruses at best prevents your becoming established and at worst risks your credibility.

The following are the fundamentals of good physical health.

Good quality sleep

Being tired makes people irritable, impulsive and less able to think strategically – a devastating combination when working with challenging students. Stay up all night at the weekend if you like but get the sleep you need during the week. If you have a young family who keep you up at night organise all the support you can.

Stop thinking about work at least an hour before bedtime. If you have a head full of the 'to do' list, getting to sleep and staying asleep might be difficult. Relax with whatever works for you. If your brain still goes into overdrive the minute your head hits the pillow, make a conscious effort to focus on your achievements rather than on your 'to do list'. If you have been drinking alcohol, drink plenty of water before you turn off the light, this will help stop you waking up at night with a raging thirst and a headache. If none of this works, find someone to help you learn some effective relaxation or meditation techniques. If you are still awake half the night, see your doctor.

Sleep is part of your time management. It is easy to say to yourself that you can plan for Monday's class after the last programme on television on Sunday night. Well, you can, but what is your delivery going to be like?

Eating well

Start the day with your blood sugar levels up so you have your body and brain in gear. This means having breakfast. Something that releases energy slowly during the morning is best – like a cooked breakfast. A cup of black coffee won't meet your needs but a piece of fruit or a slice of toast, even on the run, is better than nothing. At the very least put one of those muesli bars in your pocket so you can snack at the traffic lights. Just don't try and get to break time with no energy boost. At lunchtime take the break you are entitled to – it is as important as the food you eat. There is plenty of information available about good diet. You will know what that is, lots of fresh produce, good levels of protein and not too much fat or sugar. You will also know that eating too little or too much slows you down and depletes your precious energy. Drinking lots of water is a good idea as it helps flush toxins out of your system.

Taking regular exercise

Easier said than done when you are busy and everything else seems a priority. Choose something active you enjoy and do it as regularly as you can manage. There are several important reasons to take exercise:

- Your body works more efficiently; you sleep more readily and more soundly, have improved circulation, better posture and overall strength and endurance
- Physical activity releases serotonin, the 'feel good' neurotransmitter
- It is hard to do much else when you are exercising; this frees up the mind and broadens your capacity to generate creativity and do some problem solving.

If nothing else, run up stairs two at a time, leave the car in the garage and walk to the shops and move to music when you are doing other things.

Alcohol and other substances

You were recently a student yourself and maybe heavy drinking was part of the scene. How much you continue to do this is up to you, but if you drink heavily during the working week it is unlikely you will be able to function well next day in the classroom, especially if you drink late into the night. The alcohol will still be in your bloodstream the next morning and this puts your self-control at risk. It is also likely to still be on your breath, which undermines your professional credibility.

Reflection point

Is your own wellbeing or lack of it impacting on your efficacy in the classroom? What three things could you do to improve or maintain your physical health and wellbeing?

Deciding whether or not to go sick

Most teachers are conscientious to a fault. They know their absence has a significant impact on students and possibly on colleagues so they drag themselves into school regardless. Sometimes this is counter-productive. They take longer to fully recover and underperform in the meantime; they are also generous with spreading their germs. As a rule of thumb don't go into work if you have a temperature more than one degree over the norm or are spending serious time in the bathroom. If you are taking painkillers every few hours you will be unable to concentrate on teaching: you are also likely to be short tempered and not react to difficulties

well. If you think you could stay at home and perhaps read a book or watch daytime TV you are probably not ill enough to take a sickie. If in any doubt go into school and see how it goes. If you go downhill during the day you know it is serious enough to stay home tomorrow. It is not uncommon for teachers to work flat out all term and get ill on the very last day as they begin to relax. If this might be you, have a few days at home before you go away on holiday. This will ensure that your time of relaxation is used to best effect.



Activity

One of the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda is for children to 'be healthy'. Discuss with a partner the health and well-being issues above and the ways in which they can impact on the behaviour of pupils. Find out what others have done to address these concerns in the school environment.

Time resources

Having more demands than time available is one of the greatest stresses for teachers. In a survey in the UK, workload was given as the main reason for teachers leaving the profession, a considerably more significant factor than dealing with student behaviour (Smithers & Robinson, 2003). Workload threatens motivation when there isn't time to do things properly and priorities appear to be dictated by bureaucratic processes rather than the perceived needs of the students. Inevitably much of the time that needs to be organised is outside the school day. Spending Sunday evenings getting ready for the week is a common scenario for teachers.

New teachers are especially vulnerable to time pressures as nothing has yet become routine or familiar. Not only do you have to find out all about your school and the students you also have to find time to prepare your first lessons. Things do get better as you become more experienced and develop a bank of knowledge, skills and resources to draw on.

It sounds obvious but not everyone realises that time is a finite resource: it does not expand or increase. People respond in several ways to time issues and if you are honest with yourself you will know which of the following is true for you.

Reacting to demands as they arise

This can work temporarily but is not helpful in the longer term. It means being constantly dictated to by what is urgent rather than finding time

for the important. There eventually comes a point when several things need doing at once or you are unable to respond effectively to what needs attention right now. The result is fragmentation, leaving things half finished and a feeling of panic as your ability to keep up starts to slip.

Working all the time

This is a common scenario for teachers who see little alternative if they are to keep their heads above the flood of demands. The risk is burn-out, physical or mental illness and possibly damaged relationships. It is both unreasonable and unrealistic to do this. Work out what your limits are and question the wisdom of taking on anything that goes beyond them.

Thinking that you are working all the time!

... when the reality is that you constantly procrastinate. You respond at length to unplanned interruptions and get easily distracted; you have no idea 'where the time goes' but the work is still there to be done. If this seems true for you keep a diary to identify how much you might be able to recoup from the time you waste. Simple strategies like only responding to emails at specific times, finishing one task before starting another, getting the phone to take messages or giving yourself a time limit on open-ended tasks might ease your stress overnight.

Reflection point

What do you currently do about managing time? Does this work for you?

Planning time

You can do this by being rigid or flexible. A rigid framework leaves no room for the unexpected or for moving priorities around. This is all very well until unexpected demands inevitably appear. A flexible framework is about being realistic and takes account of your own organisational style and needs and the actual demands of the situation in which you are working. A simple example is to not attempt 'thinking and planning' activities where and when you are likely to be constantly interrupted. Identify your own patterns for mental acuity. Some individuals are at their best early in the morning, others later in the day.

It can help to plan on a weekly and termly basis. If you know when there will be higher demands you can organise yourself in advance so these times are not more stressful than they need be. Spending 15 minutes

sorting your diary into priorities at the beginning of the week can save time later on. There is evidence that carefully planning your first day in school to take account of relationship building, establishing expectations and clarifying procedures is related to positive outcomes for the next eight weeks – an excellent use of time (Worsham & Emmer, 1983).

Here are ideas that may help with time management in your first year or two of teaching. The earlier you can get to grip with these the better.

Preparing lessons

Be clear about curriculum expectations for the whole term. Ask about materials that already exist and how to access these. Decide which you will use, amend or replace. If you are still in training or in touch with fellow students who teach the same subject discuss sharing ideas and materials. Identify which websites are of most use to you and use social networking sites to help with ideas to support your teaching.

Find out about audiovisual aids so you have access to a wide range of different presentation resources, some of which you will not have to prepare yourself. Check arrangements for setting up any IT you may want to use. Make sure you know how to use interactive white boards if your school has them, and make the most of them.

Be innovative with pedagogy. Explore cooperative learning strategies (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kirk, 2001). This has many benefits in boosting self-esteem, self-efficacy and learning outcomes for students and relieves you from being a ‘chalk and talk’ teacher. Didactic pedagogy often disengages pupils and increases the chance of disruptive behaviour. You still need to plan towards specific outcomes but with a different focus in achieving these. Asking students to research and present findings to others can be valuable.

Don’t re-invent the wheel next year. Organise your curriculum resources so you can access them quickly in the future. Plan a pack of flexible lessons to use in an emergency. These can be games, structured discussions or other activities adaptable to a wide range of curriculum needs.

Administration

Keep reports brief. Bear in mind your audience and what they need to know. Parents will devote time to reading (and re-reading) what you have written. Do not waste time or energy in negativity; ensure comments are constructive, even if critical.

Plan time for basic organisation such as filing. This avoids spending valuable time trying to find what you ‘are sure you put down here somewhere’ and you don’t end up in a panic doing things at the last minute.

General

BANJO stands for Bang A Nasty Job Off (Black, 1987). Sometimes we waste time and energy putting something off because it is annoying or not straightforward. When we finally get down to it, it may be less effort than we anticipated. Save yourself the additional stress.

If you try and do everything to the highest possible standard you will burn yourself out in no time. Look at what is important to do well and where it makes less difference if you cut corners. Some things might not be necessary at all. Think about the rationale for what you are doing and judge your input by the outcomes.

Be wary of taking on too much too soon. Give yourself time to settle into the job. Enthusiasm is a gift to the profession but use it wisely. Some people take on extra work because they believe they need to prove themselves. You would do better in your first year to concentrate on developing confidence in carrying out the essential tasks.

Look at where you can double up tasks: for example, if you have a long journey to school think of ways you might constructively use this time in thinking and planning. Some people use travelling time to listen to audio books they have not had time to read.

Some tasks can be delegated; students may enjoy taking on a responsibility or helping you out. It won't help, however, if you get them to stay in and do things for you as a punishment.

Time for behaviour management

Students who cause you the most difficulties are often the most needy and demanding of your time and attention. This additional time is usually not planned for and has to come from nowhere. This then impacts on your stress at several levels. Your response may therefore be sharper and more irritable than it might otherwise be.

You may believe you have no time to promote positive behaviour, teach expectations, foster good relationships or run individual interventions for students. Some people take the view that they should not have to do this as part of their teaching. They then have to find time to react to repeated incidents of unwanted behaviour. Planning brings the control of situations back to you and within the boundaries of your own time management. Being proactive about behaviour management does not mean you never have a crisis but it certainly reduces them. More on this in Chapters 4 and 7.

Making time for relaxation

What do you like doing which has nothing whatsoever to do with your job? Whether it is sport, socialising, painting or just reading the paper, make time for it! You can get so buried in your head by the job that you



Figure 3.1

lose perspective. If you don't make time for your family and friends, you will also alienate your best sources of support in time of need. If it seems you never have time for your partner put it in your planning schedule.

Reflection point

What three things might you do to make the best use of the time available? How will these translate into actual practice rather than staying at the level of good intentions?!

Emotional resources

Maintaining emotional resilience will make all the difference to your survival in the classroom. A high level of positive emotional energy helps you to stay calm in a crisis, extends your ability to be patient, enables you to problem-solve on your feet and pick yourself up after a bad day (Fredrickson, 2009). Low emotional energy leads to ill considered reactions and means you will more easily be deflated, defeated and overwhelmed.

How you feel is not only related to what happens to you but also how you think about yourself in the job. You probably have more choices

than you realise. Maximising emotional resources also means identifying where your support lies and how and when to access this.

What depletes emotional energy?

- Feeling undervalued
- Feeling blamed or ridiculed
- Feeling you are not in control of situations
- Fearing you are ineffective
- Feeling ambivalent about what you are doing
- Being worn down by efforts that appear to have no positive outcome
- Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by constant demands, not being able to prioritise
- Trying to be all things to all people
- Other people's distress
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling scrutinised
- Feeling isolated
- Tedium
- Poor communications – not knowing what is going on leads to anxiety
- Keeping up appearances all the time
- Negativity.

What enhances emotional energy?

- Having evidence that you and your efforts are valued
- Seeing that you are making a difference – getting some positive feedback
- Having positive relationships
- Constructive conversations
- Feeling you are aware of what is going on
- Feeling you can influence events
- Believing what you are doing is worthwhile
- Having some control over what happens to you
- Feeling you belong
- Variety
- Experiencing laughter – it relieves tension
- Experiencing warmth – it is comforting and reassuring
- Feeling life is balanced – keeping a 'big picture' perspective
- Being able to be yourself.

There are ways you can maximise your emotional resources, regardless of the challenges you face. Some are dependent on other people and some you can put in place yourself. If you are fortunate to be working in an emotionally literate school where everyone is aware of these issues you will have a much higher level of emotional resources than if you

work somewhere where the only feelings that rise regularly to the surface are the negative ones (Roffey, 2008; Tew, 2010).

Emotional support from others

Your relationships with others can help maintain your emotional resources in several different ways. The following do not necessarily come from the same individuals:

- People who ‘take you out of yourself’. These are the friends who encourage you to have a good time and help you relax.
- People who value you, boost your self-esteem and think you are just great. If you are one of the lucky ones these will be members of your family as well as your long-time supporters. Children can also be an excellent source of uncritical positive feedback.
- Colleagues who acknowledge how hard you are working and are helpful and constructive rather than critical when things don’t go so well
- Confidantes – those with whom you share your inner feelings. Discuss your concerns with trusted people but be careful to maintain reciprocity in the relationship. If you are really distressed and need to repeatedly talk over the same issues then the relationship may stop being an equal one. Go and see a professional counsellor.

Reflection point

Which relationships in your life – family, friends and colleagues – boost your sense of self? How do they do that? What do you learn from this about what students need?

Be an emotional support to yourself

As was mentioned earlier, everyone has a critical inner voice that from time to time either tells us we are rubbish or that other people are a waste of space. Neither of these voices is useful, either personally or professionally. They make us feel bad about ourselves or about other people. We need to take control of these voices and not let them run amok with our feelings. Counteracting the negative voices requires some determination, but can be done. Try the following:

- When an incident leaves you feeling useless, focus on what you have learnt for next time.
- Remind yourself it is OK to make mistakes and that everyone does it. Biographies about famous people invariably include down times as well as successful ones.

- Focus on achievements, however small – for yourself and your students.
- Get a positive feedback file; put in it anything that is said or given to you that makes you feel good, such as cards, comments, letters. Include all the little notes and positives you get from your students. Take it out when you are feeling unvalued (as we all do from time to time) and remember that you are not.
- Have conversations with positive people – avoid the whingers and the doom merchants.
- When you feel so overwhelmed with strong feelings that you can't think straight, give yourself permission to not make decisions on the spot. You can almost always come back later.
- Be aware that there are choices in how you see and interpret the world and therefore choices in how you feel.
- Have loud conversations with your inner voices in the privacy of your car – it puts them in their place and may give you (and perhaps a few other drivers) some unexpected moments of amusement!
- Don't jump to conclusions or make assumptions too quickly. Our fears and imaginings about other people's motivations and purposes are often worse than reality. Check things out before you waste too much of your precious emotional resources.
- Work out what comforts and de-stresses you. It is different for everyone. What has worked for you in the past?
- Use music to change your mood. Whether it's rock, Beethoven or baroque, an immersion in sound can take you out of yourself more quickly than anything.
- Have fun. Give yourself permission to have regular spaces to do whatever raises your spirits. Don't even think about work during this time – it is your gift to be treasured.
- Plan to give yourself a treat when you have got through a really tough patch.
- When you feel at your most despondent, angry or confused, stay with and reflect on the feeling because this will help you understand your most difficult and damaged students. Bear in mind that you probably have more support to help deal with things than they do.

Getting things into perspective

I was once hitch-hiking in Spain and was by the roadside in Zaragoza for hours and hours, failing to get a lift. I was getting into a state of despair, anxiety and frustration when suddenly this single question popped into my head: 'When you look back on this day in six months' time how much will it matter?' The answer of course was not a lot. I was using up a great deal of emotional energy for little impact. I decided to calm down and enjoy the view. Within a little while a car stopped and took me all

the way home to London. Ever since I have asked myself the same question in trying times: 'Is this a Zaragoza moment or not?' It helps to get things in perspective.

Putting ideas into practice

Reflection

Go through this chapter carefully with your challenging student in mind. What resources identified here as promoting resilience and wellbeing are available to them?

What might you do to increase your student's emotional resources and resilience?

Action

Make a list of 10 possible things you could do. Choose three and do these regularly over several weeks. What differences do you notice?

Summary

The message of this chapter is simple. Look after yourself well and maximise all the resources that are in your control. This will enable you to function at the optimum level in your work. If you do this you have more chance of being effective with all students but especially those who are more demanding of you.