INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Having a successful school year and a thriving teaching career begins with you. The most important element for successful teaching is taking care of yourself, making sure your personal needs are met.

Stress can get in the way of your meeting your personal needs. To prevent the stress that too often overwhelms teachers, you need to attend to three main areas of your life. First is your physical, mental, and emotional health. If you’re like most teachers, you place your personal needs after the needs of others. Without providing time and energy to take care of your health, stress continues to build. Eventually, you might experience burnout. Avoid this unfortunate conclusion by setting boundaries to help create the time needed for maintaining good health.

Second, know the administrative details of your employment. For example, understand the terms of your contract and be aware of the criteria used to evaluate your teaching performance. This prevents misunderstandings between you and your employer, as well as the stress associated with them.

Third, take advantage of opportunities for your personal and professional growth and renewal. Such opportunities strengthen self-esteem and improve teaching skills. Taking continuing education classes, working with a mentor, and becoming active in professional associations are some of the opportunities for growth and renewal available to you.

The objectives of this chapter are to help you

- Maintain a healthy physical, mental, and emotional lifestyle
- Understand all the details surrounding your employment contract
- Ensure your personal and professional growth for a successful school year and a thriving teaching career
MAINTAIN OPTIMAL HEALTH

Good health is a prerequisite for successful teaching. It helps your body function at its best and prevents stress. When your health is poor, stress can wear out your body and soul, weaken your teaching performance, and degrade your personal effectiveness.

Make Time for Your Health

The first step in attaining good health is building in the time to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle. It must be scheduled! To find time, you might have to learn to say no to extra commitments, both work and nonwork related. If you, like many teachers, tend to put others’ needs before your own, stop! You must make time to take care of your health in order to operate at peak performance. The first question in this book deals with this issue because it is the most important factor in achieving a successful year and a thriving teaching career.

Open your notebook. Answer the following questions completely. To help you stay organized, the first digit of each question number corresponds with the chapter number.

1.1 What can you do to ensure you have enough time for each of the following?
   a. Getting enough rest
   b. Eating balanced meals
   c. Exercising aerobically
   d. Spending time with family and with those you care about
   e. Growing spiritually
   f. Exploring hobbies and non-work-related interests
   g. Exploring personal career growth activities

During lunch, avoid discussing business, eat slowly, and take your full lunch period. To protect your mental and emotional health, try to eat lunch with a staff member who has a positive attitude.

Protect Your Physical Health

Besides making time to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle, you need to protect your physical health by integrating safeguards into your daily routine. Children bring many illnesses to school that can spread quickly in the confined space of a classroom. Boost your immunity against
colds and other common illnesses by eating well, getting enough rest, drinking lots of water, frequently washing your hands with soap, and using instant hand disinfectant. Maintain your comfort by keeping an extra sweater and a pair of nonrestricting shoes in your classroom.

Most teachers get sick frequently during the first few years of teaching because they have not yet built up immunity against many common illnesses. I was no exception. In my first year of teaching, I caught many colds and had strep throat—for the first time in my life! Although teaching is a very demanding job and it is difficult to be absent, I learned the hard way that it was better to take a sick day when I wasn’t feeling well than to go to work. Pushing myself to go to work only prolonged my illness, and it probably made some of my students sick, too. Now I make sure I always have substitute teacher plans ready so I can take a couple of sick days without having to pull together plans at the last minute.

Kidney and bladder infections are another problem for some teachers. This often results from not having enough time to use the restroom during the school day—a common teaching dilemma. Make the time! If you need to, buddy with another teacher and take turns watching each other’s class so each of you can get the bathroom breaks you need.

You also need to be aware of procedures related to your health insurance benefits and the procedures for taking sick days and arriving late or leaving early due to an unforeseen illness. Further, if you should be the victim of an accident on the job, you need to know your rights and the procedures that ensure those rights.

1.2 Are there any childhood illnesses or other illnesses that you will probably be exposed to during the school year?
   a. Are there any vaccines available for these illnesses? Where can you get the vaccines? Who pays for them?
   b. What precautions can you take to avoid getting these illnesses?

1.3 Do you get any sick days, “mental health days,” personal days, or leave days?
   a. How many do you get?
   b. What is the procedure for taking these days?
   c. Are these paid or unpaid days of absence?

1.4 What are the procedures for arriving late and leaving early? Is there a penalty for doing either of these things?
1.5 What happens if you get hurt on the job or elsewhere?
   a. Are you required to report it? What is the procedure?
   b. What are your rights concerning related absences, sick pay, and keeping your position? What are the procedures for receiving these benefits?

Your Personal Safety

In addition to illnesses, every year more and more teachers have to concern themselves with personal safety. According to the U.S. Department of Education, teachers were the victims of approximately 1,755,000 nonfatal crimes at school, including 1,087,000 thefts and 668,000 violent crimes (such as rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault) from 1994 through 1998. Among the violent crimes, about 80,000 were classified as serious (such as rape or sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault). This translates into roughly 16,000 serious violent crimes each year—an alarming number. Every threat made against you, by a student or parent, must be taken seriously. Report it to your administration immediately. To help prevent potentially life-threatening situations, take the following measures:

- Lock your classroom doors and windows when working alone.
- Make sure you have something in your classroom, such as a telephone or two-way public address system, that allows you to contact the office immediately in case of an emergency. A personal cell phone with programmed emergency numbers is also useful.
- If anyone threatens you in any way, ask to keep your classroom doors locked during the school day until the situation is resolved. However, make sure you are not violating any fire codes and that you and your students still could easily vacate the room in case of a fire or other emergency.
- If your school has a policy requiring all personnel and visitors to wear identification badges, wear yours and question anyone you see who is not wearing one. Refer them to the main office to get one, and if they try to ignore your request, escort them to the office yourself or report them immediately.
- Know the teachers in your neighboring classrooms, and share a signal that you can bang on the walls if you need help.
- Do not stay by yourself in your classroom after most people have gone home, especially after dark and on weekends.
- Close and lock your classroom doors before leaving in the evening.
- If you have to return to school in the evening, park in a well-lit area as close to the door as possible.
- Always walk with another adult to your car in the parking lot, especially after sunset.
- If you have an evening conference, ask another adult to stay with you. Also, meet the parents in a well-lit common area of the building, and walk back to your cars together.
One day I happened to be in the hallway after classes had started, and I noticed two women entering the school through a side door. When I asked them why they were there, they said they came to volunteer in a particular teacher’s classroom. I told them they needed to check in at the main office (located at the other end of the building) and get visitors’ badges. When they realized that I wasn’t going to let them continue down the hallway toward their destination, they became a bit annoyed. Although I hadn’t intended to go to the office, I pretended that I did and escorted them myself. I knew that if I left them alone, they would ignore the rules. It was a very uncomfortable situation, but I knew that for everyone’s safety, I was doing the right thing.

I once scheduled a parent conference very late in the evening. I was the only person left in the school building, and it felt creepy. So I waited for the parents in the school lobby and held the conference in the main office. Before leaving, I turned on the building’s alarm system and then walked to the parking lot with the parents. Luckily, nothing bad happened. But because I felt so uncomfortable that evening, I have never scheduled such a late conference again.

- It’s always a good idea to be on friendly terms with the custodian. Let your custodian know when you work after school so she or he can stop by to check on you.
- If your life is in danger, do not hesitate to contact the police.

Because of the seriousness of some recent events, most people think that school violence has gotten worse over the past few years. Teachers and administrators agree with this perception, not because of the deadly types of violence that appear to concern the public most, such as drug abuse, weapons possession, and gang activities, but because of the behaviors that indicate incivility, such as verbal intimidation and threats,
rumors, pushing and shoving, and sexual harassment. These behaviors—usually seen by others as bullying, acting out, or disruptive behavior—are the early warning signs of violence.

Teachers know that children who are at risk for violence usually engage in visible minor behavior problems, such as bullying and poor school attitude, before progressing to using more violent acts. Other early warning signs include (1) strong feelings of rejection, isolation, and loneliness; (2) impulsiveness and chronic bullying, hitting, and intimidation; (3) being socially withdrawn; (4) feelings of being a victim of violence, persecution, or teasing; (5) gang affiliation; (6) low interest in school coupled with poor academic achievement; (7) drawings and writings that express violence; (8) uncontrolled anger; and (9) issuing serious, detailed, and specific threats of violence.

Although students at risk for serious aggression or violence typically exhibit more than one early warning sign, it is important not to overreact to any single incident or behavior. What might be a warning sign at one grade level could be more typical behavior of students at another grade level. In addition, warning signs should not comprise a checklist for labeling, stereotyping, or isolating children. Instead, the behaviors should be seen within the context of the situation and used to establish patterns of behavior.

However, if you see a student who exhibits any of these imminent warning signs, you should report it immediately: (1) serious physical fighting with peers and others, (2) severe destruction of personal or others’ property, (3) intense rage for minor reasons, (4) detailed and specific threats of lethal violence, (5) possession or use of firearms, or (6) self-inflicting injury or threats of suicide.

Do not touch an enraged student unless the student is a danger to her- or himself, to others, or to property. If you must touch the student, grab her or him to stop the situation, and avoid hitting the student first unless doing so is crucial to protecting yourself from immediate harm.

School or school system policies related to dealing with school violence will vary, but they should have a crisis plan in place and a component dealing with how to report a student who exhibits any of these imminent warning signs. In addition, if a student reports a threat to you, immediately report it to your administrators, your local law enforcement, or whoever else has been designated to receive these reports. It is imperative that all threats of serious violence be taken seriously, for your protection and for the protection of your students. Ways to prevent school violence are further discussed in Chapter 7.
Do everything possible to prevent a violent outburst from happening in the first place. Be proactive with your classroom management plan to prevent and control any classroom disturbance that could escalate into something more serious. Do not react to classroom disturbances, but respond to them. Always keep your cool.

By implementing the personal safety tips described here and by staying alert to both the early and imminent warning signs of violent behavior, you are taking measures to ensure that you and your students are safe, thus preventing unfortunate consequences.

1.6 What precautions can you take to help keep you physically safe from assaults and other types of abuse or personal violations?

1.7 What is the procedure for reporting a threat of school violence?

1.8 What are the different school safety procedures already in place at your school? Are there any others that you feel might be helpful to implement? When will you approach your administrators and colleagues about your concerns and proposals?

Using Substances to Manage Stress

Another health topic that comes up repeatedly in the research is the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs to manage stress. These substances have been found to do more harm than good. Rather than alleviating stress, they temporarily mask it. The stressors are still there. Understand that stress prevention is the place to put your time, energy, and resources—not into a drink or a cigarette.

1.9 If you use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to alleviate stress, where can you find help to stop this dependency and find other stress prevention techniques?

Protect Your Mental and Emotional Health

In addition to physical health, good mental and emotional health are important for preventing stress. Mental health involves exercising the mind and keeping it fit. To accomplish this, develop an interest that is not work related, such as gardening or a sport. These activities also help turn your mind’s focus away from stressful situations. Schedule the time to pursue these outside interests.
1.10 In which kinds of non-work-related activities are you interested? Which ones will you do? How often? Where? With whom?

Emotional health is crucial for helping you prevent stress. It is very important because your beliefs about yourself and about your relationships with others affect your self-esteem. A healthy self-esteem usually makes you better at relating to others and better at understanding your students’ needs. Therefore, if your stress is mostly due to how you feel about yourself or how you feel about your relationships with others, it is imperative that you take care of your emotional health.

**Manage Your Negative Thoughts**

Controlling your negative thoughts, especially those about yourself, is one way to improve your emotional health. Three ways to manage negative thoughts are replacing them, changing them, and changing your focus.

Whenever a negative thought about yourself or about your teaching enters your mind, interrupt it and replace it with a positive thought. Think instead about past successes in your teaching career, and remember the reasons why you became a teacher in the first place.

Another way to control your negative thoughts is to change them into empowering ones. For example, instead of thinking that you’ll never get through grading your stack of papers, say to yourself that you’ll do as much as possible in the time you have allocated. If you get them all done, great. If you don’t, then you can finish them later. Remind yourself that you are often expected to do a lot more than is humanly possible, so you need to be realistic about what you can accomplish.

I begin every school year with fervor. I have tons of energy and lots of ideas that I add to my to-do list. By the third week of school, I’m swamped. My list is filled with things I have to do in addition to all the things I want to do. However, the differences among the items on my list get blurred, and I put a lot of pressure on myself to accomplish all of them. As a result, negative thoughts about myself run rampant. Then I know I have lost sight of what I can do. When this happens, I step back and look at my list again. I prioritize the items and try to be realistic about what I can accomplish within the time I have.

Changing your focus also helps remove negative thoughts. An easy way to accomplish this is by changing your activity. For example, when you are having a negative thought, change your focus by reading a good
professional resource or by rearranging your bulletin boards. Keep a list of these activities taped to the inside back cover of your plan book so that the ideas are handy when you need them.

Sometimes you might find yourself in the presence of a negative colleague. If this person’s negative attitude begins to influence your thoughts, politely remove yourself from the situation. Getting away might help change your focus and thus your negative thoughts.

Good emotional health has a lot to do with your thoughts about yourself. You need to stop beating yourself up! Every time a negative thought crosses your mind, you must interrupt it. Remember, you have complete control over what you are thinking. To prevent stress, it is imperative that you change how you think and what you focus on.

1.11 Do you have any pervasive negative thoughts about yourself or about your teaching?
   a. What teaching successes have you had that you can use to replace your negative thoughts?
   b. In what ways can you change the negative thoughts into empowering ones?
   c. What kinds of activities can you do to change your focus, especially when you are teaching?

When we make mistakes, we often go over them in our minds again and again, inadvertently reinforcing our mistakes. A better way to approach the situation is to ask, “How will I handle this situation the next time it happens?” What is done is done, so don’t harbor negative feelings and thoughts. Instead, rehearse future responses and behaviors either to prevent the situation from happening again or to successfully manage it if it should happen again.

**Positive Affirmations Can Empower You**

You can also use affirmations to achieve emotional health. You can create positive affirmations about yourself, both personal and professional. For an affirmation to be effective, you must truly believe it and repeat it to yourself with all the positive emotion you can generate. A sample empowering affirmation might be, “I am a competent and caring professional who does not react but responds to stressors in my environment.” Use this one, or create one of your own.

1.12 What affirmations can you create that would empower you when you think of them? When and how often will you say them?
Communicate Effectively by Being Assertive

It has been found that teachers handle stress better when they are in a supportive environment. You might be thinking, “How do you get this support?” At first glance, you might feel that gaining support from administrators, colleagues, parents, and others is impossible. However, by becoming assertive, your chances of enlisting the support of others increase.

Being assertive can reduce your stress because it teaches you how to enlist the support of others by communicating your thoughts and needs efficiently and effectively using “I statements.” An example is, “I feel . . . when you . . . because . . .” You might also want to add “and I want . . .” or “and I need . . .” Often, you need to use these statements when someone requests that you do something for them. Being assertive helps you say no to things you know you should not or cannot do. It enables you to stand up for yourself without bullying others or letting others bully you.

If being assertive is not easy for you, don’t answer the request immediately. Ask for some time, and tell the other person when you will respond. Next, weigh the request against the things you have on your plate, as well as against your values. Then decide on your response and be willing to explain how you arrived at your decision.

Being assertive is one way to control the one thing you have complete control over—you yourself. Take full advantage of this fact for helping you prevent stress. Several books are available to teach you how to become more assertive. If you would like more help, check out continuing education programs offered by your community or a local college.

1.13 Where can you learn more about becoming assertive? How can you ensure that you set aside enough time to learn and practice this skill?

One way to take care of yourself is to know your limitations. During the first few weeks of school, you will be asked to serve on many different committees and to take on extra duties. Because you know yourself best, only you can determine when you need to decline these invitations. Don’t be afraid to say no! Learn to be assertive or else suffer the stressful consequences of biting off more than you can chew.

Organize a Support System

It is also important to identify to whom and where you can turn for help and support in times of emotional strife. Make sure that those you
identify are people you can trust. Sometimes the person you thought you could trust stabs you in the back. Be careful! If you don’t have a colleague or administrator you can trust, confide in a spouse, a friend, or even a pet. Be wary of including your students or their parents in your personal support system, because they can easily use the information you shared with them against you. If you are friends with any retired teachers, you should consider them a great source of support. Because they have walked in your shoes, they can offer some good ideas, materials, and advice.

As part of their benefits package, employers sometimes contract with outside agencies to provide free counseling for employees on an as-needed basis. Check with your school’s human resources or guidance departments to find out if this benefit is available to you.

If you feel like you are going to explode and have no one you can turn to, write in a journal. Get it all out on paper. Although verbal feedback from a journal is impossible, most people get a sense of relief from putting their stresses in writing because it provides an outlet for venting emotions and sorting out events. It offers a nonthreatening environment in which to be very honest about a situation and about the role you played in making it a stressor. Many times, just by being able to sort out events, you find the clues for overcoming and preventing similar situations from occurring in the future.

I began writing in a journal the first evening of my first day of student teaching. I got hooked and have kept a journal ever since. I find that it helps me vent my frustrations. It also helps me sort out the events of my life—both inside and outside school. For me, journal writing is therapeutic. As a bonus, I can look back at old entries to see how much I have changed, how much I have grown. That always gives my self-esteem a boost.

1.14 Who can you trust when you need emotional support? If they are not available, what options do you have for getting the support you need?

UNDERSTAND THE DETAILS OF YOUR EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

The details of your employment include all the paperwork required by your employer for your personnel file. There are many potential stressors in this area. Luckily, teachers have a lot of control over most of them. This part of taking care of yourself involves analyzing the terms of your
employment to help you determine exactly how much control you have over each one.

**What to Do Before You Are Hired**

First, briefly examine what an employer might require you to have before you are even hired.

1.15 What do you need to be employed by this particular school?
   a. A background check? If yes, what kind, who pays for it, and what forms need to be completed?
   b. A formal application with the employer?
   c. Proof of past work experience? What kind of proof?
   d. A teaching certification? If so, what type?

1.16 Who do you contact to find out the following?
   a. Has your employer received all the required documents and information?
   b. Is any additional information required?

**Understand Your Contract**

Once you have secured a job, read your contract—including the fine print. Read all paperwork, booklets, and forms associated with your employment that are mailed to you from your school system’s central office. This is where many teachers unconsciously abdicate their control. By ignoring these important documents, they set themselves up for turning simple, easy-to-handle situations into stressful experiences. Do not let this happen to you! You’ll probably get the answers to many of the following questions during your interview, but don’t take anything for granted. Verify the answers with your school system’s central office and with the paperwork you receive.

1.17 What are the terms of your contract?
   a. What is the difference between a continuing, terminating, or other type of contract? What type of contract did you receive?
   b. Is tenure an option? How can you earn it? How can you lose it?
   c. What is expected of you in your new position? What responsibilities and duties are stated in your contract and in your job description? Which ones are not stated but implied?
   d. Are inservice classes or other types of courses required to keep your job and your certification?
   e. Are you required to sign up for extra duties, committees, chaperoning, detention, coaching, and other activities? If yes, which ones and how many? What are the commitments and responsibilities of each? Do you receive a stipend for them?
   f. What is the schedule for standing meetings that you are required to attend for your grade level or department, school, and school system?
g. Are you required to attend meetings (such as faculty and PTA meetings, workshops, and seminars) outside school hours and during your personal time? Are you compensated for your time with money or with extra time off?

If a written job description is not available, check the performance evaluation forms used by your school. It usually contains a list of the criteria used to evaluate your work. These criteria will outline the responsibilities and duties that are expected of you.

Is Your Class Roster Fair?

An issue that tends to cause teachers undue stress that might or might not be included in your contract is the assignment of a greater than average number of students with major behavioral problems. If you are a special education teacher assigned to teach this type of population, this might not be an issue for you, but for “regular education” teachers at all grade levels, it can be a significant stressor.

To ensure that your class roster is fair, first determine the school’s average number of “difficult students” per class by asking your colleagues, administration, and office staff. Second, check your students’ cumulative records as soon as you have your class roster. If you feel that you have received an unfair load, discuss it with your principal as soon as possible.

1.18 In your school, what is an average number of students per class who have significant behavior problems?

1.19 After checking your students’ cumulative records, do you find you have several of these kinds of students in your class? When can you speak with the principal regarding your concern?

Know the Details of Your Health Insurance Benefits

Most teaching positions also have a health insurance benefits package. Especially with the advent of health maintenance organizations (HMOs), completing the proper forms and following the correct timelines and procedures are imperative for preventing stress. The time, energy, and money lost by not following proper filing procedures can be enormous. Make sure you understand your benefits and how to get access to them.

1.20 What are your health insurance benefits?
   a. Who do you need to contact to find out if you have received all the proper filing documents for obtaining or maintaining any health insurance benefits you might be entitled to?
b. Have you correctly completed and handed in all the proper
documents to obtain or maintain any health insurance benefits
you would like to receive?
c. Does the benefits enrollment office have your information
recorded correctly?
d. When you visit a doctor, what are the proper filing procedures
for receiving your health insurance benefits?
e. When do your health insurance benefits become active, such as
the first day you begin working or the first day of the next
complete calendar month you are employed?

**Keep Tabs on Your Financial Benefits**

In addition to health insurance benefits, you also have financial
benefits. You need to complete additional forms to receive the proper
salary and to have the correct amount of taxes withheld from your pay-
check. If you do not take care of this paperwork, you will most likely expe-
rience a lot of stress.

1.21 What are your financial benefits?
   a. Who do you need to contact to find out if you have received
      all the proper tax withholding, retirement, beneficiary, invest-
      ment (such as 401K or 403B), direct deposit, and other finan-
      cially related documents you are required or have the option to
      complete? Where do you send them after you complete them?
   b. To obtain the salary you are entitled to, what kinds of proof of
      past work experience, degrees, and certifications are required?
   c. Which department or person has to see these proofs?
   d. Is the information on your first pay stub correct?

When I began teaching, I was so excited to have a job that I
completely ignored all the information on my pay stub. After a
few months, as I began to settle into my new job, I finally took
the time to look at my pay stub—to *really* look at it. I did the
math and realized there was a discrepancy between what I
thought I was supposed to be paid and what I was actually being
paid. I called the payroll department and inquired about the dis-
crepancy. It turned out that my certification level was recorded
incorrectly because the state had not yet notified them of my
graduate degree certification status. It took a few more months
to get my back pay, but I always wondered if I would have
received the money if I had not brought it to my employer’s
attention.
How to Augment Your Salary

Due to the use of a fixed salary scale, most teachers’ salaries are based solely on years of experience. Usually, salary scales are based on the total number of years you have completed working as a teacher in a full-time capacity. In addition, years spent teaching part-time or partial years of full-time employment are often not included in the total. Therefore, it is difficult for some teachers to climb the pay scale. In most school systems, staying employed full-time is the best way to obtain salary increases. Nevertheless, find out from your employer the exact rules and procedures for pay-scale advancement.

Another way to increase your salary is to volunteer for duties or extra responsibilities that pay a stipend—for example, serving as department chairperson, club leader, or testing coordinator. If you are interested in augmenting your salary, find out whether your school has any of these opportunities and whether you qualify.

1.22 What extra duties and responsibilities pay a stipend? What are the qualifications for these positions? Are you interested in pursuing any of them? Do you have the time and energy to commit to any of them?

Because the first year or two of teaching can be overwhelming in terms of the volume of work, it is wise not to volunteer for additional, nonrequired duties during that time. The extra responsibilities will only add to the enormous amount of stress you will experience as a new teacher, and you will probably find that the stipend is not worth the extra pressure. Wait until you have a solid command of your day-to-day responsibilities before volunteering for extra duties.

Ensure Favorable Performance Evaluations

Maintaining acceptable performance evaluations is a condition of employment in most contracts. Evaluations can cause teachers a tremendous amount of stress. Minimize the stress by finding out the exact evaluation procedures and the criteria used for evaluation. Trends in performance evaluations show an increase in the use of different types of assessments, such as professional portfolios, in addition to the traditional observation conducted by a principal or assistant principal. Therefore, it is important to find out what your performance evaluations will entail.
You should also get to know who will be evaluating your job performance. Schedule a preevaluation meeting to glean what your evaluator’s priorities are. Ask the evaluator or your colleagues about which teaching styles and teacher attributes the evaluator approves of and endorses. If you feel you can improve your chances of a positive evaluation without compromising your own teaching philosophy, try to develop these styles and attributes.

When meeting with your evaluator, have all the information you will need in a folder. Keep your notes in order, and prepare a list of questions for the meeting. If you feel uneasy about the impending meeting, get a friend or colleague to role-play your meeting with you.

You should also understand the postevaluation process and your rights as an employee if you should receive a poor evaluation. Ascertaining the process beforehand helps prevent intensifying the stress you might already be experiencing from such a negative situation.

1.23 How will your performance be evaluated?
   a. What are the components—such as observations, videos, and portfolios—of your evaluation?
   b. What are the evaluation criteria?
   c. How many evaluations are required, and when are they done?
   d. Are there any informal interim evaluations that can give you an idea about how you are doing, including your strengths and areas that you need to improve?
   e. How is the evaluation conducted?
   f. Who formally evaluates you? When can you schedule a pre-evaluation conference with the evaluator? What aspects of the teaching process are most important to the evaluator? Which teacher does the evaluator consider excellent? What attributes or teaching style does that teacher have? Should you focus on developing and emulating any of those attributes or that style to help you obtain a positive evaluation?
   g. What happens if you receive a good evaluation?
   h. What happens if you receive a poor evaluation? What are your rights as an employee?
   i. When can you schedule a time to audiotape and videotape one of your lessons for critiquing your own teaching? Whose audio and video equipment can you use?
Audiotape and videotape your lessons. Audiotaping is a very effective self-assessment tool because it helps you isolate your tone of voice and inflections better than using a video camera. In addition to being easier to borrow and set up than a video camera, a cassette recorder is more inconspicuous than a video camera, thus discouraging your students from “putting on a show” for the camera. On the other hand, videotaping your lessons can also be very helpful, especially if you want to see the whole picture, including how your students are behaving and how you are attending to different stimuli in the classroom, both verbally and nonverbally.

Most evaluations will be the result of observations conducted by your principal or assistant principal. When your observation is scheduled, prepare the lesson plan for the class to be observed. Ask an experienced colleague or mentor to review your plan to make sure that it is an appropriate activity for a formal observation. Since you are the expert in your classroom, also prepare a data sheet for the class that you will be teaching for your observation. The data sheet should include a seating chart or class roll with diagnostic information about each child, including any special problems, disabilities, or health problems. Be sure to include an explanation of anything that might happen during your class period that the evaluator might question or misinterpret, such as a child quietly leaving the classroom to go to a regularly scheduled resource class. If a significant interruption is scheduled to occur during your observation, such as a fire drill, find out how it will be handled, whether the observation will be stopped and rescheduled or will continue after the interruption even if you do not have enough time left in the period to complete your lesson plan. In addition, an evaluator who is new to your school may not be familiar with your subject or grade. In this case, be prepared to share your curriculum guides and show how your lesson plan supports the curriculum goals outlined in the guides. Share as much information as possible about your lesson plan and your class during your preevaluation conference to prevent any misunderstandings from surfacing during the observation.

As soon as possible after the observation, make notes about what you felt you did well and what you could have done better. List suggestions of things you could do to overcome the weaknesses you identified. Also, note any event that could have been interpreted in a negative manner by your evaluator. Bring your notes to your postevaluation conference.

During the follow-up conference, request the observation data and ask specific questions about areas of strength and weakness the evaluator
observed. For example, if you received high marks for classroom discipline, ask the evaluator what you did to deserve those marks. To avoid self-incrimination, allow the evaluator to identify the deficiencies. If she mentions a weakness that you had also identified, let her know that you are aware of it and discuss the suggestions for improvement you had brainstormed. Ask for her help and involvement as you work to improve your areas of weakness. Have the evaluator put in writing any additional recommendations for improvement, with timelines for completion of activities. Finally, request copies of all data collected during the observation or evaluation and a copy of your final evaluation.

If you have a positive feeling about your observation and your pre- and postevaluation conferences went well, send a note thanking the evaluator for making the experience a pleasure rather than a hardship. The evaluator will feel appreciated and happy to have been helpful.

During your evaluation feedback sessions with your evaluator, make sure you learn the following:

1.24 How are you doing? What are your areas of strength and weakness?
1.25 Where is your school and school system heading in terms of curriculum program goals, and how do you fit into the short- and long-term plans?
1.26 What additional skills or education do you need to progress?
1.27 If you continue with your current level of performance, what can you expect for the future, including teaching assignments and performance evaluations?
1.28 If a problem develops, what kinds and amount of support can you expect from your evaluator?

Remember to make copies of all your evaluations and keep them in a safe place for future reference. You might need them to help update your résumé, or you might need them as supportive evidence if your teaching practices are ever questioned.

**Maintain a Professional Portfolio**

A professional portfolio can be a valuable tool. Many professionals—architects, engineers, artists, and writers, for instance—have portfolios that highlight their accomplishments. For years, teachers have known the power
of portfolios in presenting student achievement. Likewise, you can use a professional portfolio for demonstrating your achievements to students, parents, administrators, and potential employers. You can be creative in compiling a portfolio, but it should contain some standard pieces:

- An updated résumé
- Teaching certificates
- College transcripts
- A statement of your teaching philosophy
- Sample unit and lesson plans
- Professional development plans and evidence that supports progress and completion of these plans (which are discussed later in this chapter)
- Records of any work-related seminars, courses, or workshops you have attended
- Performance evaluations
- Documentation of awards, commendations, honors, or letters of praise you have received
- Photographs of your students at work
- Photographs of your classroom and bulletin boards

Every year I take pictures of all my students doing different activities. I keep them in a photo album with all the previous years’ photos. Near the end of the year, I bring the photo album to school to share with my students. Many of them are interested in seeing what I have done in the past (especially if they recognize older students in the photos), and they love seeing pictures of themselves!

Whether or not you create a professional portfolio, reference letters and a reference list are good things to have in case someone requests them. Remember, discuss with your references ahead of time what they would say about you if they were ever asked. Many times your references just ask you to tell them what you would like them to say. Make sure you know what they will say before you use them as references!

1.29 Do you want or need to build a professional portfolio?
   a. What should it contain?
   b. Which pieces do you want to obtain this school year?

1.30 Do you need references?
   a. Who can you ask to write a reference letter on your behalf to keep in your personal professional portfolio?
   b. Who can you ask to be on your list of references?
Display your degrees and your teaching certificates in your classroom. Other professionals have these documents displayed, and teachers should, too. The display usually has a positive effect on parents, students, and administrators.

GROW PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY

Finding opportunities for personal and professional growth is a common concern among teachers. Teachers understand that learning does not end when you receive a diploma. Learning more skills, both work and non-work related, must continue for professional and personal growth—the foundation for a thriving teaching career. Teachers also understand that learning occurs in many different ways and in many different places, not just in classrooms. This section helps you find different opportunities for continuing your education, both inside and outside the classroom.

Professional Development Plans: Guiding Personal Growth

Some school systems require every teacher to have some sort of professional development plan that outlines areas for the teacher’s further investigation and learning. The plan should be created collaboratively with your principal and be based on your needs as well as those of the school and the school system. If you are undecided about your goals, select ones that address your job’s performance standards, as outlined by your performance evaluation criteria. The plan should be directed at changing teacher behavior rather than student behavior. In addition, it should include formative and summative evaluations and be reviewed periodically and revised as needed. If your school system does not require a plan, you might consider creating one for yourself anyway. You can use it as a guide for continuing your growth as a teacher and as a person. See Resource 1.1 in the Resources for Successful Teaching section for an outline of a professional development plan.

When completing a professional and educational development plan, make sure the items are specific, reasonable, measurable, and time bound. Limit the plan to no more than three goals with two or three strategies each. It should include at least one long-range goal. Consider including an item or two related to strengthening your understanding of the content or
population you will be teaching. Finally, make sure you collect written
documentation to provide evidence of progress, completion, and achieve-
ment of your plan’s goals.

1.31 Does your school system require you to have a professional
development plan?
a. What information must you include in the plan?
b. Do you write it collaboratively? Are goals determined collabor-
gratively?
c. Do you have to complete a form?
d. Who has to sign it?
e. To whom do you submit the plan?
f. How often is it reviewed?
g. What is the procedure to update the plan?

A professional development plan usually includes any additional edu-
cation courses required by your employer. Besides the required courses,
there may be other things you would like to learn about, career or non-
career related. Whether or not they are part of an official professional
development plan, make time to pursue your interests.

1.32 Are any additional courses or education required by your
employer, such as inservice classes, certification renewal credits,
or classes toward a graduate (master’s or doctorate) degree?

1.33 If additional education is not required, do you still want to take
some career-related courses or to do your own investigative
learning about something related to your work, such as improving
your classroom management skills?

1.34 Is tuition assistance available? How do you apply for it?

1.35 Do you want to learn about something that is not work related?

1.36 How can you arrange your schedule to allow time for attending
classes and completing assignments?

1.37 How will you evaluate, both formatively and summatively,
whether this education has helped you?

1.38 What kinds of rewards and incentives can you include to moti-
vate yourself to follow through on your plan?

1.39 How often will you update your educational plan?

Networking: Nurturing Your Professional
Relationships

Becoming actively involved in your profession provides for both per-
sonal and professional growth. By joining teacher organizations, you have
the opportunity to network with other teachers and to fill your calendar
with social activities that support your career goals.
1.40 What local, state, and national unions and associations exist for the following?
   a. Teachers in general
   b. Teachers in your particular field (subject, grade level, and so forth)

1.41 How do you become a member?

Networking provides the opportunity to learn from other teachers by watching them, listening to them, and sharing with them. You can find these teachers in professional organizations, but don’t overlook the teacher next door! Your colleagues in your school and school system are treasures, so do not isolate yourself. They are invaluable in helping you grow, both personally and professionally.

One kind of special teacher that can have a tremendous role in helping you become an effective teacher is a mentor-teacher. Since a mentor usually works closely with you, he or she can help you identify and deal with many of the potential stressors you might face in your teaching assignment. Make the time to get to know your mentor.

Master (excellent) teachers in your school are like angels sent from heaven. You can learn so much from these wonderful teachers! Most of these people have their potential stressors under control. Watch and learn from them. Do not underestimate the value of this kind of learning. It is imperative that you find master teachers and develop and nurture relationships with them. To learn additional teaching strategies, observe them during your planning periods. You might want to schedule a time to observe a master teacher teaching a lesson that you will also be doing or, for the sake of comparison, a lesson that you have already done.

Your relationships do not need to be one-sided—give as well as receive. For example, for those who have helped you, offer to watch their classes during your free periods or write a sincere note of appreciation and courtesy copy your principal.

1.42 Will you be assigned a mentor?
   a. Who is your mentor?
   b. What is the relationship between you and your mentor?
   c. In what ways can a mentor help you?
   d. What are your responsibilities to your mentor?

1.43 Who are the master teachers in your school and in your school system?
   a. What kinds of things can you learn from them?
   b. How can you learn from them? Can you schedule a time to meet or to observe master teachers?
   c. May you ask one of them to be your mentor?

1.44 What kinds of things can you do to show your appreciation for these special people?
The Truth About Giving and Receiving

When you give your time and resources to other teachers, you receive much more in return. By helping your colleagues solve their stress-related problems, you gain insight into your own stress and actually decrease the amount of stress you are feeling. Through mutual support, you reduce feelings of isolation and helplessness and become more emotionally and socially healthy individuals. If an entire group of teachers supports one another, the teaching team becomes more effective. Therefore, you need to examine ways in which you can work together with other teachers to prevent and deal with stress.

Peer Coaching: An Effective Way to Give and Receive Professional Support

Peer coaching is one way to give and receive professional support. In peer coaching, two or more teachers with mutual trust and rapport agree to observe and coach one another. When teachers observe each other, the one teaching is often the coach, demonstrating effective teaching practices. The teachers focus on helping one another sharpen specific teaching strategies and skills they feel they need to improve.

Peer coaching is a collegial process. It begins with two or more teachers discussing their staff development needs and teaching practices. The teachers decide which teacher behaviors (teaching strategies and skills) they wish to improve. Then they make plans to watch each other teach and decide on what instruments the observer will use to objectively record data that will identify strengths and weaknesses in the observed teaching behaviors. Afterward, they discuss their experiences and review the data collected during the observations. Using constructive feedback, they then discuss what improvements can be made, study new skills needed to implement the improvements, and plan for additional observations. Because teachers are not evaluating one another, peer coaching is a nonthreatening way to give and receive support.

Another way to implement peer coaching is to create a team of teachers that agree to present model lessons for one another. In this way, no one is critiquing anyone else and everyone is learning from each other.

If you are interested in trying peer coaching, approach your colleagues and principal about it. A school that does not already have a peer coaching program might offer to allow you and your interested colleagues to get formal training in this very successful, effective method for professional development.

1.45 Is peer coaching something that you are interested in pursuing? If yes, which teachers do you feel you can help and who will give you the most honest feedback in a supportive manner?

Peer Support Groups: Building a Support Team

Another way of working together to prevent stress is establishing peer support groups. The purpose of these support groups is to help one
another clarify stress-related problems and come up with possible solutions. Effective support groups have a deep level of trust and rapport. They also start and stop on time. They have a set agenda and stick to it. According to Scaros (1981), the procedure for conducting a peer support group meeting is as follows:

1. Form a support group with four to six colleagues with whom you feel comfortable and who exhibit mutual respect, trust, and support.

2. Select a mutually convenient meeting time and place.

3. Select one person to go first and to discuss a work-related problem or challenge that she or he is having. This teacher is considered the "focus person" for that particular meeting.

4. The group asks questions to clarify the problem, and the problem is documented.

5. The group then discusses the problem and documents possible solutions.

6. The focus person then takes the opportunity to clarify any or all the suggestions.

7. The remainder of the time is used for helping the focus person decide what is the best action to take based on the suggestions. The action is documented in contract form—for example, "I, ..., will ... by . . ."—and it is signed by the focus person and the other members of the support group.

8. Another meeting time for additional support and follow-up is scheduled.

9. A new person becomes the focus person, and the steps are repeated.

Like a journal, peer support groups give a teacher a nonthreatening environment in which to be honest and objective about a stressor. An additional benefit of establishing a peer support group is having several people you can trust when you need help.

1.46 Have peer support groups already been established in your school or school system? If yes, how does a teacher join one? If no, can you start one? What will you need to establish a group?

**Sharing Information With Colleagues**

As a teacher, you are bombarded with information. You may not find a lot of this information useful, but someone else might. Pass the information along. It could help another teacher solve a problem and prevent stress. In addition, when we help others deal with their stress, our own stress level decreases. Therefore, it is very important that we never lose sight of the fact that in giving, we receive.
1.47 In what ways can you help other teachers?
   a. What kinds of things can you share with them?
   b. If you attend a workshop or seminar, how can you share with your colleagues what you have learned?
   c. What vehicles can you use to share information with other teachers in your grade level or department, school, school system, state, country, and world?

We are sometimes forced to work with colleagues who appear to be very territorial with their materials and ideas. Perhaps they feel threatened by other teachers or do not respect their peers’ teaching styles and expertise. Some colleagues might believe that beginning and less experienced teachers need to go through their rites of passage alone (just as veteran teachers did when they began teaching many years ago). Perhaps they feel that they will be viewed as interfering, or they might think that assisting teachers is the principal’s responsibility, not theirs. Maybe they get so caught up in their own classes that they can’t see what else is going on around them. Nevertheless, colleagues who do not share their expertise perpetuate the “sink or swim” situation in which many teachers often find themselves. As mentioned earlier, teaching can be a very lonely job, especially if you are surrounded by colleagues who keep their ideas and materials to themselves. Unfortunately, I’ve experienced this more than once. All teachers, experienced and new, have something to offer. If we take the time and effort to share with one another, we will help one another and strengthen our profession.

SUMMARY

Taking care of yourself includes taking care of both your personal and your professional needs. In addition to taking control of your life, it is important to help others gain control of their lives. Helping others solve their stress-related problems also helps you relieve your own stress. Your teaching team becomes more effective and thus more successful. Therefore, identify where and when you can help other teachers and actively do so. Taking care of yourself is the most important step because it shows you how to take control of the only thing you can completely control—yourself.