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ABSTRACT

Air traffic control, surgery, and teaching are probably three of the most potentially stressful occupations in the world. Stress can be benign and growth-producing or malignant and destructive, depending on three primary factors: 1) the possession of coping behaviors which are effective and for which there is feedback as to the degree of their effectiveness, 2) the predictability of the stressful situation, and 3) the duration or repetition of the stressful circumstances. There are two categories of stress escape devices that serve as effective "counter irritants" to teaching. One group of counter irritants consists of activities that make demands or stimulate creative endeavor in a completely different field. A second group of counter irritants consists of activities that require only participation. An effective prescription for a balanced program of counter irritants to teaching should include systematic exploration of both demanding and relaxing activities in physical, social, intellectual, and emotional areas. (Author/JG)

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## Counter Irritants to Teaching

Madeline Hunter

Air traffic control, surgery and teaching are probably three of the most potentially stressful occupations in the world. In these occupations, people are responsible for functioning in learned patterns of decision making based on the accumulation of years of research, yet must possess the "on their feet" high speed thinking and decision making skills which modify established patterns in order to successfully accommodate unexpected situations triggered by the variance of humans and the caprice of nature.

Because of the impact of such stress on human body systems, most people do not plan to engage in air traffic control as a lifelong occupation. Surgeons and teachers do make such a commitment. Surgeons may argue, "Yes, but you teachers do not have life and death in your hands." To which teachers appropriately respond, "True, but when you are working with one patient, at that moment (s)he is your only responsibility. You aren't also responsible for other patients to see that they are working diligently to recover their health. And you don't have to keep your eye on some patients that are apt to disorganize the sheets or pour out their medicine. We are responsible for the learning and behavior of everyone in the class at the same time.

In addition, teaching presents a 5-6 hour daily fare of potential stress. The same students are not the same depending on what has just happened or is about to happen to them. (Halloween carnivals, someone taking their best friend); whether the barometer is rising or dropping (teachers can predict rain from the increase in wiggle, shuffle and noise); who needs what (and they all seem to need the teacher) plus the juxtaposition of the stars (which seems to be the only way to explain some days).

On top of all this, teachers must handle the daily feeling that one false move on their part, one careless remark, one inadvertent blunder and the result will be instant chaos. It's amazing that with all this stress, teachers retain their sanity, to say nothing of their sense of humor, their commitment to students and their downright artistry in performance.

Particular events cannot be labeled as universally stressful because peoples' feelings and reactions differ. What is stressful for one person could be stimulating to another. "Emotional allergies" of different people can trigger their stress and produce a reaction in a vulnerable body spot. Also the social and emotional context are as important as the physical properties of the stressor (a shove from the aggressive shopper vs. a shove from an affectionate friend).

Stress can be benign and growth producing or malignant and destructive to the body systems.\* Handled well, stress builds strength and competence for the next encounter, thereby contributing to a valid and positive self-concept.

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\*Collaboration on the research related to the effects of stress was provided by Dr. John Yarbrough, M.D. and Dr. Elsie Yarbrough, M.D.

This growth occurs when an individual confronts a situation that is difficult enough to challenge him/her to develop new ways to solve the problem. The next time those conditions are encountered, the individual experiences less stress and learns the solution better until finally those conditions can be anticipated with little or no stress. The coping behaviors that are developed transfer to other similar situations so those situations also become less stressful. Thus a brief successful encounter with stress strengthens general resistance to stress and subsequent capacity to deal with similar pressure without a stress reaction.

Physical symptoms of benign stress are faster breathing, occasional insomnia, "washing machine stomach," sweaty palms, a tense neck, all of which are temporary.

In contrast, the body's responses to malignant stress are difficulty in breathing, chronic insomnia, urinary and bowel abnormalities, nausea, ulcers, personality change, depression, addiction to drugs and alcohol, all of which are of long duration, have a cumulative effect and are destructive to the body's systems.

Whether stress exerts a benign or malignant effect on a person is dependent on three primary factors:

1. The possession of coping behaviors which are effective and which there is feedback as to the degree of their effectiveness.

A teacher is not in control of a student's home background or I.Q. but can determine his/her own teaching behavior. Therefore, when the teacher possesses a repertoire of effective teaching skills and knows cause-effect relationships

between teaching behavior and a particular student's learning, it makes the difference between having some control over the stressor and feeling helpless. Consequently, the most effective stress prevention measure is excellent pre-service training followed by continuing professional development of a quality which constantly enhances professional competence and enables teachers to plan skillfully and to make increasingly sophisticated on-the-spot educational decisions. Unfortunately, this very same factor of inservice can be one of the most provoking sources of stress when that inservice adds hours of time to teachers' already overscheduled day and produces increased frustration because what is "preached" is the latest fad (which doesn't work) or some method conceived by a theorist, romanticist or dreamer who never knew or has long forgotten what "kids are really like."

## 2. The predictability of the stressful situation.

Knowing "what is coming" enables the teacher to summon the professional skills and resources available and be ready to cope with stress. Having a situation unexpectedly "blow up" does not give that opportunity. Correct anticipation of "what could happen" is not the result of divine revelation but comes from learning cause-effect relationships in education as well as becoming sensitive to the significance of "signaling clues" from particular students or situations.

The experienced teacher knows what it's going to be like on the afternoon of the Halloween Carnival and prepares calming activities. The first year teacher without that predictability goes home with a migraine.

### 3. The duration or repetition of the stressful circumstances.

Surprisingly, the intensity of a stressful situation except in unusual circumstances, does not contribute as much to its harmful impact as does its duration or frequency. While the physical reaction to stress is felt immediately, results from repetition of that stress can become cumulative. ("There comes that teacher again.") The ability to "turn it off" and thereby terminate the stress for a short period can change the degree of malignant potential.

There are two categories of "turn off" or stress escape devices that can redirect a teacher's energy, reduce stress and restore equilibrium: "counter irritants to teaching." These counter irritants serve two different but complementary purposes.

One group of counter irritants consists of activities which make demands or stimulate creative endeavor in a completely different field. The result is a deliberately conceived process or product (art, dance, music, bridge, collections, gardening, etc.) which is measured by some criterion ("I did that well, this one is not so good") and demand effort to the degree that a teacher cannot engage in the activity and continue to think about teaching. Skills different from those required by teaching are called into play, so there is complete respite (escape) from the strain of teaching because energy and attention must be directed to something else. In addition, there is the bonus of psychic re-creation as new areas of endeavor are explored and enjoyed.

A second group of counter irritants consists of activities which require only participation. These are "mental chewing gum" activities which are non-demanding, soothing or sedatingly repetitious, and can be done without any

"push" by the teacher. Engaged in for the pleasure and relaxation yielded by the activity not for the purpose of accomplishment, they drain off tension as do the Oriental jade pocket pieces or Greek worry beads. Physical activities, arts and crafts, needle work, gardening or reading "whodunits" can function in this capacity or those same activities can demand intense focus depending on how one engages in them. If the purpose is to supply the balm of relaxation without strain and often with repetitiveness, those activities can drain off fatigue and tension and encourage relaxation. If the purpose is to stimulate and re-create through recreation, those same activities can redirect purposeful energy, which, because of the change of focus, refresh the teacher.

For a well balanced program of counter irritants to your own immersion and absorption in teaching, consider some activities in each of the following categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive as the same activity can be engaged in with differing purposes.

#### A. Physical Counter Irritants

While teaching is physically draining, it usually taxes neither breathing nor muscles. Consequently, teaching leaves one fatigued, but not "stretched out." Swimming, tennis, dancing, gymnastics, jogging, brisk walking, calisthenics or any rigorous movement of one's choice is therapeutic, for these activities add stress in a different dimension by "revving" up breathing, heartbeat, muscle tone and leave the teacher with a feeling of pleasant relaxed tiredness rather than the tense exhaustion and "drained feeling" which usually are the residue from a day of teaching.

A teacher can engage in demanding physical activities: "Can I swim in better form, jog farther, run faster, do more pushups, learn new dance steps, learn to ride a unicycle, etc.?" A teacher can engage in those very same activities with the objective being relaxation: paddle around in a pool, jog, do some pushups, or dance just for fun.

#### B. Emotional and Social Counter Irritants

Emotional and social demand is concerned with, "Can I do it? Can I bring it off?" For stimulation, the teacher exposes him/herself to areas where there is some risk. "Will I make it with \_\_\_\_\_?" The blank can be a person or an activity. New tasks, books, T. V. and social groups which generate a strong reaction belong in this category.

Emotional and social respite from stress occurs when one does the same thing over and over; a repetitive operation which because of lack of demand acts as an emotional massage (and teachers need one!). The very same activities, swimming, running, pushups, can serve this purpose as can needlepoint, gardening, macrame, light reading, T. V. , etc.

Relaxing with friends can be one of the most healing social experiences and acts as a balm to wounds from stress and frustration. (We ought to list it as a miracle drug.) But beware of continually talking about school problems rather than the refreshment of a change of focus.

A stimulating, taxing, but rewarding social counter irritant is the deliberate seeking of new contacts, friends with different interests (educators tend to become inbred), new clubs or classes. Teaching can become an addiction where



the remedy is a group of people who know little or nothing about teaching and will not tolerate perseveration on educational problems. Seeing the world through other people's nonteaching eyes can provide the perspective that is needed as well as highlighting the invariance of problems in all professions. The relief is similar to that of parents who get together and discover, "It isn't me - it's the nature of kids."

C. Intellectual Counter Irritants

Learning about something new, in an area of one's interest, with no accountability (reading about Greece, Eskimos, history, orchids) or just reading to pass time can provide a respite from the stress of classroom reality as well as an opportunity to move, vicariously and safely, into a different world.

On the other hand, learning about something new, with expectations for oneself or accountability to others, can be stimulating and even stress provoking, but acts as a counter irritant to the daily demands of teaching. Used judiciously, the feeling that one is growing and developing intellectually can be a very fulfilling experience which yields rich dividends in educational, emotional and social areas. Meeting an exacting but reasonable and attainable intellectual demand, builds one's self-concept as well as develops useable knowledge and skills.

An effective prescription for a balanced program of counter irritants to teaching which would guard against the "burn out" that occurs when people experience continuing stress should include systematic exploration of both demanding and relaxing activities in physical, social, intellectual and emotional



areas. From sampling actual experience and participation, the teacher should select at least one stimulating and one relaxing activity for weekly pursuit, not just for summer vacation. Counter irritants best serve their function while teachers are teaching.

We have long acknowledged the variance in student learning needs. It's about time school districts accommodated the variance in the needs of teachers which enable them to do an artistic and professional job in the classroom. This need can be partially met by a program for continuing individualized professional growth which provides constantly accelerating, coping and predictive skills that will increase satisfaction and reduce stress in fulfilling the daily demands in teaching. This professional growth program for teachers should be a part of the contract assignment, not tacked to the end of an exhausting day, thereby adding further stress which depletes the energies of overextended teachers.

In terms of counter irritants to teaching, however, the prescriptions for teachers must be their own, and will vary greatly according to the situation and individual. Teachers must assess their own needs in terms of nonteaching activities. A balance between stimulation from invigorating demands of one's self and relaxation from pleasurable nondemanding activities will maintain a resilient and creative professional.



