Stress Management for Special Educators:
The Self-Administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR)

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Abstract

The Self-Administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR) is a stress management strategy designed to facilitate awareness of the physical, mental, emotional, and physiological effects of stress through the interconnectedness of the brain, body, and emotions. The purpose of this article is to present a stress-management model for teachers, especially special educators, to use on a daily basis to help prevent professional burnout and better cope with job-related stress. Research, definitions, and factors contributing to teacher stress are included. The STAR is described, along with a rationale for its components: the full color spectrum, brain-body research, physical exercise, therapeutic touch, and positive affirmations.

Keywords
stress management, teacher retention

Footnote:
A copy of the full-color spectrum is available from Krista Williams. She can be reached at passion4yoga@yahoo.com .

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Teachers, in general, experience high levels of job-related stress compared to professionals in other fields (Nagel & Brown, 2003; Hastings & Brown, 2002; Brown & Nagel, 2004). According to Darling-Hammond (2001), "nearly thirty percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years" (p. 12). In particular, special education teachers continue to leave the field in greater numbers than general education teachers (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997). Teacher stress has been identified as a primary reason for the exodus of special educators into other fields of education (Billingsley, 1993). In a study by Hastings and Brown (2002), special education teachers were found to have higher levels of anxiety, felt less supported, and reported lower job satisfaction. Over the past five years, many researchers (e.g., Brown & Nagel, 2004; Hastings & Brown, 2002; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Zabel & Zabel, 2001; Embich, 2001) have investigated the prevalence and theories of teacher stress; however, few authors present specific stress management techniques that teachers can use on a daily basis (Nagel, 2003; Koehler, 2001).

Historically, the role of the special educator was to provide direct services to children with disabilities, document progress towards IEP goals and objectives, collaborate with ancillary personnel (e.g. speech/ language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists), and maintain contact with parents. As the program of choice for children with disabilities is inclusion in the general education classroom, the role of the special educator is changing in order to align with current practices; federal and state mandates; and professional development, professional standards, and technology.

Current Practices

Lamar-Dukes & Dukes (2005) identify "20 roles and responsibilities the effective [inclusion support teacher] IST should perform while working in an inclusive school" (p. 1). These roles fall under the categories of (a) assessment of student needs, (b) curriculum, (c) instruction, (d) accommodations and modifications, (e) collaborative consultation, (f) interpersonal skills, (g) shared responsibility of students, (h) communication, (i) documentation of interactions, (j) social inclusion, (k) positive behavior support, (l) in-class support, and (m) knowledge of effective teaching strategies. Klingner and Vaughn (2002) discuss the role of the special educator being complex and multifaceted. "The inclusion teacher must be knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, skillful at anticipating student difficulties with learning tasks, and adept at providing ongoing adaptations and accommodations" (p. 1). In addition, they identify the inclusion model as effective co-teaching that includes collaborative planning, implementing instructional adaptations for all students, providing alternative assignments, and assisting with homework. Because inclusion supports at least two licensed, trained professionals in the classroom, special educators are able to help all students, not just students on their caseloads who receive special education service,therefore increasing special educators' teaching responsibilities.

Federal and State Mandates

As indicated in the No Child Left Behind Act, special education teachers must become highly qualified in the core subject area(s) they teach. For a large majority of special educators, this means returning to the university to earn credits in each subject area in which they provide direct instruction, submitting a portfolio to a state review committee, or passing an exam that demonstrates

competency in specific content areas. New Mexico, for example, has implemented a 3-tier licensure program. Teachers, at specified yearly intervals, must submit dossiers that address established criteria in order to advance through the licensure levels and keep their jobs.

Professional Development, Professional Standards, and Technology

Professional development activities are critical in order for teachers to remain current with standards in the field. McLeskey and Waldron (2002) identify three reasons to establish professional development opportunities for teachers: specific program needs emerge after the program is implemented, new teachers require different supports than veteran teachers, and teachers learn new strategies to improve professional practice.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest organization that focuses on disability issues. CEC provides the professional standards (10 teaching standards and 213 sub categories) to which special educators are expected to adhere.

Technology in the classroom is critical in order for students to become competitive at school and in the workplace. Teachers are encouraged to use technology in the classroom through direct instruction and student use to help students become technologically proficient and decrease the gap in the Digital Divide. However, only 20% of the 2.5 million public school teachers feel comfortable using technology (NCES, as cited in Bucci, 2003). Learning technology is conducted through professional development workshops or enrolling in university courses.

The job of the special educator is most difficult and demanding and research indicates that special educators report higher stress levels than general education teachers (Nagel & Brown, 2003). Therefore, designing a stress management model primarily for special education teachers seemed appropriate. Since, stress management is important for all teachers, the term *teachers* will be used to refer to both special educators and general education teachers. The purpose of this article is to provide a systematic framework for stress management that teachers can use on a daily basis, without depending on outside resources, to prevent professional burnout and effectively cope with job-related stress. The Self-Administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR) is a model designed to facilitate teachers' awareness of the physical, mental, emotional, and physiological effects of stress through the interconnectedness of the brain, body, and emotions.

Definitions of Teacher Stress

Borg, Riding, and Falzon (1991) define teacher stress as "a physical, emotional, or mental reaction resulting from one's response to certain pressures in the environment and how well one can manage those pressures" (p. 60). Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1979) define teacher stress as "potentially pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes resulting from aspects of the teacher's job and mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to his self-esteem and well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the perceived threat" (p. 89). These definitions imply that teachers' perceptions and thoughts play a role in creating the potentially negative effects of job-related stress.

Variables Contributing to Teacher Stress

Nichols and Sosnowsky (2002) outlines the student-related variables and organizational factors that influence teacher stress. Many student-related variables can contribute

to job-related stress: (a) student diversity relative to ability and behavior; (b) student misconduct, disruption, verbal and physical threats; (c) unmotivated students; (d) required amount of direct student contact, supervision, and support; and (e) large caseloads and class sizes. Organizational factors can also contribute to teacher stress: (a) dissatisfaction with university teacher preparation, (b) lack of administrative support, (c) role conflict and ambiguity, (d) limited professional development opportunities, and (e) a lack of social support networks within the school/district.

Impact of Teacher Stress

Stress can have a potentially negative impact on a teacher's physical, emotional, mental, and physiological well being.

> The body responds to stress by producing adrenaline, cortisol, beta brain waves, muscle, and nervous tension. Constant adrenaline results in fatigue; cortisol weakens the immune system; ... and, constant stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system makes [teachers] tense and nervous, while depleting energy. Such over-stimulation can lead to serious illness (Koehler, 2001, p. 7).

Since teachers are exposed to a high degree of stress and its potentially negative impact, they may benefit from using stress management techniques in order to cope with daily challenges. "Although a certain level of stress is necessary and results in improved performance, too much stress negatively affects health" (Deckro, Ballinger, & Hoyt, 2002, p. 291).

Self-administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR) Model

From experience as a special educator, in addition to training as a professional massage therapist and holistic health practitioner, the lead author has come to recognize the need for a stress management technique that is easy, enjoyable, and self-administered – at home or in the classroom. The STAR was designed to help teachers become more aware of the impact of job-related stress and to experience relaxation. Given the demands of their job, teachers may benefit from a hands-on tool that they can use independently without attending a structured, scheduled workshop. The STAR is a systematic framework that integrates physical movement, brain-body research, therapeutic touch, and positive affirmations. A specific sequence of ten physical exercises accompanies the STAR model. Therefore, the STAR presents a unique integration of tools – some traditional, some contemporary.

Components of the STAR

Full color spectrum

The STAR is a color-coded model for stress management that shows the interconnected relationship between the brain, body, and emotions. The STAR model uses a full color spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet) because it is intended to address the full spectrum of daily life stressors. Therefore, it can only be used by looking at a color copy of the model. The colors of the rainbow activate specific behavioral and/or emotional responses (Shang, 2001; Davidson-Rada & Davidson-Rada, 1993). An ancient system of Ayurvedic medicine (Frawley, 1996) involves the chakras, "an interconnected network that regulates growth and physiology" (Shang, 2001, p. 83). According to Davidson-Rada and Davidson-Rada (1993), the colors of the rainbow are directly connected to the seven chakras and

"denote actions regarding wellness and health care" (p. 42). The specific placement of each of these seven colors on the STAR model corresponds to an intended physical, mental, or emotional response: basic needs (red), physical body (orange), will power (yellow), emotions (green), communication (blue), intuition (indigo), and inspiration (violet) (Davidson-Rada, 1993). Even though the full color spectrum is not included in this article, the exercises that follow can be effectively completed to begin the stress-management process.

Brain-body research

The STAR also integrates brain-body research, which indicates a direct connection between physical movement and activation of the brain (Dennison & Dennison, 1994). Neuroscientists emphasize, "learning is a mind-body activity and not a brain-only product" (Kovalik & Olsen, 1998, p. 29). Based on modern brain-body research, the seven exercises in the STAR involve rocking on the feet: front-back, left-right, and up-down. These exercises are borrowed from Brain Gym® (Dennison & Dennison, 2004), an educational program that engages students in body movements designed to integrate the left and right brain hemispheres. The underlying theory of brain-body research is that specific patterns of physical movement enhance cognitive processing, optimize learning, heighten awareness, and promote relaxation (Maskell, Shapiro, & Ridley, 2004). Smith, O'Connor, and Crabbe (2002) found that mood states, such as anxiety, are consistently improved after performing physical activity.

Therapeutic touch

Therapeutic touch, another important component of the STAR, is a holistic approach to health care that aims to treat not only the physical body, but also the underlying psychological, mental, and emotional levels (Burden, Herron-Marx, & Clifford, 2005). To be effective, therapeutic touch involves the placement of hands in specific sequences either above or on the body (Wardell & Weymouth, 2004). Therapeutic touch is effective in "reducing stress, anxiety, and pain; accelerated healing; some improvement in biochemical and physiological markers; and a greater sense of well-being. Participants generally reported improved quality of life physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually" (Wardell & Weymouth, p. 154). Burden reports that therapeutic touch can promote biological and physiological changes in support of a relaxation response.

Positive affirmations

The STAR also involves the use of positive affirmations, "I" statements that are self-affirming and self-empowering (e.g. "I am in control of my emotions", or "I handle my emotions responsibly.") Research shows that positive thinking can decrease stress and activate a relaxation response (Brady, 2004; Benson, 1975).

> The mind plays such a significant role in creating stress. However, if we are able to become more aware of the negative thoughts and feelings that enter our minds and develop ways to replace them with positive ones, we will be able to live happier, less stressful lives -- in school and beyond (Brady, p. 84).

The Framework of the STAR Model

The STAR is comprised of four levels that progress sequentially. Level I consists of seven elements pertaining to the category of inner realms: (a) basic needs, (b) physical body, (c) will power, (d) emotions, (e) com-

munication, (f) intuition, and (g) inspiration. These involve the internal experiences and inherent physical, mental, and emotional aspects of life. Inner realms are significant to everyday functioning, since they interact with the external environment. By bringing awareness to the inner realms, the teacher can identify the source and impact of stressors.

The STAR includes three levels beyond Level I. Level II introduces six relationships, which encompass a broad range of interpersonal relationships. At this level, the teacher becomes aware of how relationships may impact or relieve stress. Level III includes the four external environments, which cover the full spectrum of physical locations where individuals live, work, play, or interact with others. The significance of the external environments is how they support or diminish the experience of relaxation. Mastery Level IV provides the four dimensions of existence and six symbolic guides, designed to facilitate the process of relieving stress and experiencing relaxation. This level allows the teacher to synthesize and integrate the overall benefits of the previous three levels. At this time, only the elements and accompanying descriptions for Level I will be described. Level I includes the most basic, important elements necessary to effectively administer the STAR. Since the levels progress sequentially, it is best to experience the benefits from Level I before proceeding on to the next.

Level I

The *inner realms* of the STAR model include seven elements: (a) basic needs, (b) physical body, (c) will power, (d) emotions, (e) communication, (f) intuition, and (g) inspiration.

Basic needs refer to the quality of food, clothing, shelter, water, and air. Lack of basic needs may contribute to stress. For example, poor air quality in the classroom can contribute to teacher stress by causing allergies, headaches, nausea, or fatigue.

Physical body is the state of the physiological and biological processes of the human body. Physical ailments, disease, or discomfort can become a source of stress. Teachers may not get enough sleep, for example, contributing to fatigue, headaches, and susceptibility to illness.

Willpower is the motivation and desire to actualize goals or ideals. If teachers feel overwhelmed or discouraged with work responsibilities, they may not have a strong sense of willpower to make changes or improvements in their professional and personal lives.

Emotions refer to mental responses to a thought or feeling that may be physically palpable. Emotions can be a source of stress; for example, a teacher may become angry or frustrated with a student's disruptive behavior.

Communication involves the verbal or non-verbal expression of thoughts, feelings, or emotions. Lack of or inadequate communication may create stress. For example, a teacher may not be able to communicate to the principal about specific problems with students in the classroom.

Intuition is a mental, emotional, or physical sense of what is right, based on past experiences, personal values, and beliefs. The inability to access intuition may be a source of stress. Teachers who rely too much on rigid procedures without having freedom to use their own decision-making faculties may feel a lack of intuition.

Finally, *inspiration* refers to wisdom or clarity that comes from interacting with other living things (mentors, colleagues, students, animals, or natural surroundings) or non-living things (movies, photographs, or

images). A lack of inspiration can be stressful. Teachers who become isolated from other colleagues or lack of administrative support may not experience inspiration.

How to Use the STAR

Recall that in order to experience the full effects of the STAR, the full color spectrum will need to be accessed. Since the STAR is self-administered, teachers can choose when and where to use the STAR, without the need to implement a formal schedule or structured plan. The STAR can be easily administered at the teacher's convenience during lunch, breaks, or at home after school. It can be used on a daily basis in a series of ten steps designed to enhance self-awareness and activate relaxation. It is advisable to complete each one before moving on to the next. Some of the steps are written in a self-questioning format to help increase awareness of the source and the impact of daily life stressors.

Step 1

Begin by asking yourself: *What is the biggest challenge I face at this moment?*
Example: *"My biggest challenge is a student who disrupts the class by being too noisy."*

The first question is intended to bring awareness to the most immediate stressor. By asking this question, the teacher identifies a challenge that may be affecting job performance or contributing to perceived stress levels. "Non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness" is the first step to reducing stress. There's tremendous satisfaction in taking a step like this right in the middle of feeling overwhelmed by your day-to-day activities" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 386). The teacher may identify more than one challenge at any given moment. Focus on whatever comes to mind first.

Step 2

Make a statement in the form of *I feel* ____, and/or *I am thinking about* ____, as you notice any thoughts, feelings, emotions, and/or physical sensations. At this time, you may not notice anything in particular.
Example: *"I feel tightness in my chest and stomach. I am thinking about how I am going to make it through the rest of my day."*

The purpose of the second step is to prepare for identifying a source of the challenge.

Step 3

Perform the seven STAR exercises, which integrate physical movement, brain-body research, and therapeutic touch. Each one is named by the shape of its corresponding hand placement. The seven STAR exercises act as a diagnostic method for identifying the impact of stress. The purpose is to become aware of the mental, physical, emotional, and/or physiological effects of daily life stressors. Performing the STAR exercises should take no longer than three minutes, while standing in a neutral position with feet spread apart hip-width and knees slightly bent.

Step 4

Ask yourself: *Which of the seven inner realms is the source of my challenge?*
Example: *"The source of this challenge is my emotions."*

This question allows the teacher to focus attention on a specific source of stress. Since the seven inner realms of the STAR model address all aspects of daily life, this question pinpoints one particular area; thus, facilitating increased awareness of individual needs.

Step 5

Ask yourself: *Why/how is this inner realm the source of my challenge?*

Example: *"My emotions are the source of this challenge because I feel overwhelmed and frustrated with this student."*

This question increases self-awareness by specifically identifying how the stressor may be impacting the teacher's life. This is an essential step in the process of administering the STAR, since it allows the teacher to gain a sense of control and self-empowerment.

Step 6

Spend at least one minute focusing specifically on the inner realm that you identified as the source of your challenge. Take three deep breaths and make a statement in the form of "I feel ____," and/or "I am thinking about ____," notice any thoughts, feelings, emotions, and/or physical sensations that may arise as you breathe and focus on the inner realm you identified.

Example: *"I feel that I may have been inappropriate with my class today. I may have taken out my frustration on my students."*

The purpose of this fourth step is to further enhance self-awareness by focusing one's attention on mental, physical, and/or emotional reactions to the identification of a stressor.

Step 7

Choose at least one affirmation for the inner realm that you identified. An affirmation is a positive "I" statement that is self-affirming and self-empowering.

Example: *"I am in control of my emotions,* or *I handle my emotions responsibly."*

Write your affirmation down in a safe place so that you can easily refer to it at your convenience. You may wish to repeat and/or reread the affirmation throughout your day.

The purpose of this step is to promote positive self-image, self-control, and empowerment through the conscious use of an affirmation in the form of an "I" statement.

Step 8

The next step is to select the corresponding exercise from the STAR exercises for the inner realm that you identified as the source of your challenge. Perform the exercise at your convenience. At the same time, say your affirmation out loud to yourself. You may wish to repeat this exercise throughout your day.

Example: *(While performing the exercise corresponding to the realm of emotions) – say, "I am in control of my emotions."*

This step is designed to specifically address the source of stress through the performance of hand placements and physical movements that focus on a corresponding area of the body.

Step 9

Repeat the seven-step STAR exercises. Say, *I feel* ____, and/or *I am thinking about* ____. Notice any differences in your thoughts, feelings, emotions, and/or physical sensations as you perform the STAR Exercises.

Example: *"I feel better. I am thinking about how this student behaves well when the class activities are more structured."*

By taking a moment to notice any differences in thoughts, feelings, emotions, and/or physical sensations, the teacher integrates the physical, mental, and/or emotional benefits of the process. Relaxation can be achieved through focusing one's awareness on the physical, mental, and/or emotional impact of performing the exercises and repeating the affirmation.

Step 10

Finally, spend at least one minute focusing specifically on the inner realm you identified as the source of your challenge. Take at least three deep breaths as you notice any thoughts, feelings, emotions, or physical sensations that arise as you breathe. Focus your awareness to any differences in thoughts, feelings, emotions, or physical sensations.

Example: *"I feel more calm. I can breathe more easily. I am thinking about how I could react differently to this student's behavior in the future."*

The purpose of this step is to prepare for identifying possible solutions to one's challenge. By noticing any differences in thoughts, feelings, emotions, and/or physical sensations, one may discover possible solutions or practical ways to address the challenge.

Summary

The STAR model is a self-administered stress management strategy designed to increase awareness and promote relaxation. Each of the steps of the STAR can help teachers gain a sense of control by facilitating increased awareness of the impact of job-related stress. Research indicates that lack of control over one's environment contributes to teacher stress (Embich, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2001). The STAR further assists teachers in managing stress by providing positive affirmations that can increase teachers' sense of self-esteem and job satisfaction.

Teachers should not be discouraged if they do not experience immediate benefits. Since the effects of stress are cumulative, the process of becoming aware and achieving relaxation occurs over time. Teachers are advised to use the STAR at least once a day for a total of ten days to experience the full benefits. The STAR can be used alone or with a friend or colleague. To maximize the benefits, teachers may try using the STAR at different times of day or in different locations.

The STAR is designed for special education teachers; however, it is appropriate for all teachers to effectively cope with the everyday challenges and pressures of working with students, especially those who have disabilities. According to Hastings and Brown (2002), knowing how to actively cope with stress would act to moderate the impact of a stressor (e.g., students' challenging behaviors) on teachers' well being. By practicing stress management, teachers can be proactive in minimizing job-related stress. The physical movements, relaxation techniques, and positive affirmations included in the STAR can help teachers experience higher levels of job satisfaction for a longer period of time.

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