



How to keep off the schoolday stress treadmill

At the start of the school year, Robyn Pearce suggests strategies that will help you from becoming a stress casualty statistic

Before we get into some practical techniques to help you sustain some holiday joie de vivre for the rest of the year, let's take a glance at some pretty serious statistics.

- ◆ Did you know that more than 600 Victorian teachers have been forced off the job because of workplace stress in the past three years, with Workcover paying out more than \$17 million in compensation? (AAP General News Aug 6, 2008).
- ◆ Did you know that in New South Wales in 2001, more than 23,000 teacher working days were lost due to stress-related leave?
- ◆ And what about the difficulty in retaining young teachers? Stress is certainly not the only issue (<http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/wil02520.htm>) but it does impact on the 'up to 40% of teacher education graduates who leave their schools in the first three years of appointment to US and NSW schools'.

Part of the problem is the kind of people who are drawn to the teaching profession. For many educationalists the job is a vocation – they don't just go the extra mile, but the extra ten miles – for the sake of the students and the satisfaction of a job well done. All

this wonderful commitment is very well and good, but when it kicks back and damages the personal lives and families of these same wonderful people, something's out of whack.

Jack's story

Jack is a senior teacher at a large city school. When he shared his story at a training session the room went very still.

"I am a dedicated teacher. I used to work all the hours God gave me. I did all the extra-curricula jobs I was asked to do, which meant I was often out at night and most Saturdays. Took work home; was always thinking about work. This pattern went on for years. One night I came home from school to be greeted by my wife, looking very sad but determined.

"She said, 'I give up. I can't compete with your work any more. School's won. Clearly I'm not important enough to spend time with. I'm out of here.'

"Since then I've continued to be a dedicated teacher but I've put boundaries around my involvement. I now have a life. Sadly it was too late to save my own marriage, but I've been able to help some of my colleagues."

Protect yourself

Here are some practical tips to help you protect yourself from the distress of a life out of balance and either leaving the profession exhausted and sad or suffering health or relationship breakdowns.

Step 1 'Me' time is NOT selfishness

If that thought has ever filtered into your tired brain – get over it. In fact it's a caring thing to do, for others as well as yourself. If you're burnt out and exhausted, who's going to do your job and keep your home fires burning brightly?

Step 2 Lock in 'time out' – every week

Recharge and personal time is too important to leave to chance – it needs to be planned for. If you consistently plan your week rather than just your day it's far easier to schedule 'me' time. Most people use their diary as an appointment taker and if there's a gap, other things squeeze in. I encourage you to flip that behaviour. Instead, turn your diary into a planning tool. Download my free ebook *How to Master Time in 90 Seconds* at <http://www.gettingagrip.com/products/e-books/index.asp> for a quick overview of how to plan and prioritise in such a way that you are included in the schedule.

Step 3 Get the right language around the issue

Don't say 'I can't fit it in'. Instead ask 'How can I fit it in?' The quality of the question determines the quality of the answer.

Step 4 Even a few minutes a day makes a difference

Ask yourself: 'If I give myself 30 minutes a day to do anything I like, what would I do and when and where would I do it?' Just the very idea of regular 'me' time is energising and exciting (and for some it's so uncommon that at first it's scary). If you're in a family or partnership, you can support each other to have this space.

Some daily 'chill out' strategies

- ◆ Drive home by a lovely setting and take 10 minutes to walk in the fresh air.
- ◆ At the beginning of the day get up 30 minutes earlier than the family and use that as your quiet time.
- ◆ Change your clothes and take a shower as soon as you walk in – cast off the day's events by casting off the clothes.
- ◆ Instead of turning on the TV with its attendant crop of noise and disasters, put on some quiet relaxing music.
- ◆ Get into a regular exercise program. If you don't like exercising alone, find a support group or start one. Last October, I began running with a group of women. It's so much more fun (and consistent and effective) than pounding the streets on my own. I'm amazed that it's taken me so long to return to a social habit I had over 20 years ago.
- ◆ Have a regular time to stop. Many people have a ritual 'before-dinner' drink where they sit down and relax. If possible, avoid having such a break with the Six O'clock News – instead of relaxing you're bringing in the world. No 'me time' there – just gloom and doom. If anything really dramatic happens someone will tell you.

Step 5 Put a high value around privacy and separation from the job

Especially in a small community, it's very hard to have any privacy. This is even worse if you're living in the community in which you work, especially if you're in the school house next door to the school. People often don't stop to think that they might be the third person to knock on the door that Sunday afternoon or the fifth person to phone during your tea time or favourite TV program.

Darryl found he was getting calls from 6.45 am to as late as 10 pm. Very few were critical to the running of the school, like vandalism or a fire. They even included homework queries. He knew he had to do something when his part-time release principal started getting them too. Enough was enough, but what to do?

Some solutions for the phone

- ◆ 'I'd like to help you now, but in order to give your issue the time it deserves I'm going to suggest you ring the office and make an appointment.'

- ◆ Don't list the school house or your private residence in the phone book. If it really is a crisis you'll get a knock on the door, but at least it stops the call at 8 pm asking for help with Johnny's homework.
- ◆ Turn the answerphone on at the time you choose, leave it on all night, and don't turn it off until the hour you're prepared to take calls. Put it on silent if you can't resist a ringing phone.
- ◆ If you don't want the answerphone on all night, use it when you want uninterrupted time – having dinner, watching your favourite show, entertaining.
- ◆ If the answerphone solution wouldn't work because you've got teenagers out in the family car, or aged parents for whom you must be accessible, consider a second line that only family know.
- ◆ Others give their near and dear a signal, such as two rings in quick succession to attract attention.
- ◆ Educate the family to leave messages. If you're home they'll get a reply shortly. This gives you time to listen to the messages and reply to them in your own time.
- ◆ You could use a mobile as your private number, as long as you haven't given it out to half the

community, the teachers and your Board.

Other 'distancing' ideas

- ◆ Live elsewhere. It may seem a bit radical, but I know at least one principal who deliberately shifted – 30 miles away.
- ◆ Have interests outside the community – it saves you getting too insular.
- ◆ Enjoy regular weekends out of the region. If you're not there they can't get you. Guard your own space. Everyone needs time out.

Download Robyn Pearce's free report *How to Master Time In Only 90 Seconds, a simple yet powerful diagnostic tool to help you identify your key areas for action. You'll find it at <http://www.gettingagrip.com/products/e-books/index.asp> And while you're there, enrol for your free *Top Time Tips – practical advice every two weeks.**



Robyn Pearce is an international author and speaker. Check out www.gettingagrip.com for heaps of tips on time saving.

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