

Six Top Tips to Support Headteacher Wellbeing

Taking Care of Yourself First



The press, media and study after study tells us that Principal recruitment and retention is in crisis, nevertheless there are many things school leaders can do to make sure they're not another one of those burnout statistics.

The NFER survey in 2016 showed that increasing numbers of Principals are leaving the profession before retirement age, with many articles and leaders themselves citing the intense pressures and challenges of the job, unrealistic targets, a loss of passion and a lack of support as responsible for this.

Meanwhile, in a survey undertaken by the National Governor's Association in September 2015, 43% of 4,383 respondents reported it was difficult to find good candidates when recruiting senior leaders for similar reasons. In light of this, perhaps it is no surprise that England could be facing a shortage of up to 19,000 senior teachers by 2022.

Most of us came into the profession because we had a vision of how we thought education should be, we loved children, had an enthusiasm for our subject and wanted to make a difference. Sadly, with the changes that have taken place in education, many leaders and teachers can find themselves disconnected with their original reasons for coming into education.

I often think of us climbing an education mountain where we are snowed under with never ending amounts of paperwork, ambushed by parents leaping out of prickly bushes when we least expect them and vulnerable children who sometimes

need more care and attention than time and resources allow.

On top of this, there are boulders in the form of SATs, Ofsted, budget cuts and as we climb halfway up the mountain we find the media laying in wait for us, with yet another doom and gloom story about what we haven't done and how we are failing yet again.

It can feel as though we have become buried under the government's never-ending impositions in the form of targets, exams, SAT reforms and curriculum changes to name but a few! No wonder we sometimes find it hard. The education landscape today does undoubtedly feel challenging and stressful. The workload pressures, constant changes and demands are an ever-present realities of the job.

So, how do we address these challenges?

There are many things we can do to not become a martyr of the system or undone by the stresses of the role.

The first step to doing this is recognising what stress is and what it is telling us. The word stress is often understood as meaning "pressure" or "tension," but it can also more broadly be defined as "a force which causes an object to change."

I think this definition rings true as when we suffer stresses and strains in our body, it is our physical, chemical or emotional forces that change and signal to us to adapt. They are our warning signs that change is needed.

Too often, however we do not listen to our bodies and end up with distress, which manifests physically as pain, muscle tension, injury or disease; emotionally with symptoms of jealousy, insecurity, feelings of inferiority, inability to concentrate, poor decision making, mental disorientation, depression and anxiety, etc.

So what is stress telling us to change?

I believe it is telling us to better care for ourselves. It is telling us – as I'm sure you will have heard it said in every pre-flight demonstration – to put on your own 'oxygen mask' before you help others.

Don't become so preoccupied with trying to help secure everyone else's oxygen mask that you forget to secure your own.

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You are not going to be much help to anyone, let alone yourself, if you're in a pre-comatosed state!

Many of my coaching clients will tell me they have depleted themselves for the sake of others: pupils, staff, families and friends.

However, the irony is that by neglecting their basic needs and putting themselves last – they have hindered their ability to properly care for those people they long to serve.

After all, you are not really going to be much good for anyone else in your life if you are depleted, lacking energy or are in a state of constant irritability.

However, by taking the time and care to secure your oxygen mask, when the challenges of school life come hurtling towards you, you will have some foundations with which to deal with them. Having the mask will mean that you will have enough fuel to support everything and everyone else in your world.

So what does putting your own mask on first look like?

Well it starts with creating daily habits that nurture and sustain you, such as:

1. Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Cut down on all refined and processed foods, sugar, fried fatty foods, additives and all stimulants like tea, coffee and alcohol. Instead eat more wholegrains, vegetables, fruit, whole wheat pasta, seafood, free range/organic poultry and dairy products.

2. Drink water throughout the day. By staying hydrated, you'll be taking care of your most basic needs first. Water is also essential for cleansing the body so try to drink at least 4-6 glasses a day.
3. Exercise. Start an exercise programme – walking, running, swimming, aerobics, dancing or yoga and follow it regularly two or more times a week. Medical research indicates the better shape you are the easier you will find it to handle stress.
4. Take time off from the digital screens and replace them with rituals of self-care. While screens may feel relaxing, and allow you to turn “off,” try and find a screen-less activity to truly take time for yourself. Instead, skip the TV and create a rituals of self-care, like:

- A bath
- Legs up the Wall with eyes covered for 5-10 minutes
- A five minute foot massage
- Listening to relaxing music with a cup of tea

5. Unhealthy Workloads - Say ‘NO!’

- This is the hardest word for a headteacher to say! Most of us are kind and caring individuals, high achievers and hugely diligent. We lead because we want to make a difference and the word ‘no’ is so hard to say. But we **MUST** say it, if we are to survive in this culture where there are ever-increasing demands.
- Try saying: ‘Not now’ and then give a future time frame.

Do not become an endless resource for everyone. Your time is precious.

6. Laugh A lot

- Take time to laugh. Watch a good comedy on television, go out to a comedy show or alternatively meet up with those amusing friends of yours.
- When it comes to stress, if you can laugh at it you can live with it. Laughter can help us see things differently, make us feel happy, inspire us. What nourishment!

No one can ever be immune to close encounters of the stressful kind.

Remember it's how you handle it that counts. 



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