

Stress in the College Classroom: Not Just a Student Problem Anymore

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Abstract:

Contrary to public perception, many college faculty members find their jobs stressful. Causes include competing institutional demands, coping with changing student demographics and expectations, managing technology, and finding personal and professional balance. Unfortunately, most college instructors receive little training on how to manage their classroom, never mind their own stress levels. As content experts in their fields, they may also be reluctant to admit to struggling or feeling vulnerable. Learning to use the techniques of Cognitive Behavior Therapy can help teachers effectively identify and manage stressful thoughts and feelings. By controlling their own stress levels, professors can improve both their job satisfaction and their teaching efficacy.

Key Words:

Teaching, Stress, Coping, cognitive behavior therapy, teaching efficacy.

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Why Do Faculty Find Teaching Stressful?

Stress has long been a component of faculty life (Gmelch, Wilke, & Lovrich, 1986; Gmelch, 1993; Gates, 2003). Certainly, tight economic conditions, shrinking University budgets, and increased faculty loads don't help (Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, Hapuarachchi & Boyd, 2003). One outcome of these economic stressors is that many professors find themselves interacting with more students than ever before (Thorsen, 1996), while also trying to maintain their research productivity and secure grant support to contribute to their University's budget (Bok, 2007). The Higher Education Research Institute Undergraduate Teaching Faculty 2013-2014 faculty survey (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Berdan Aragon, Suchard, & Hurtado, 2014) queried 16,112 full-time undergraduate teaching faculty members at 269 four-year colleges and universities about their academic lives. On the stress portion of the survey only 37.5% of respondents reported that "to a great extent" they achieve a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives, and only 22.7% felt that faculty at their institution are rewarded for being good teachers. Other sources of stress involved the demands of publishing, dealing with colleagues and students, and managing teaching loads (Eagan et al. 2014).

Advances in technology also contribute to faculty stress levels. Many teachers are concerned that email and chat rooms have made it easier for students to ask questions and make comments they might not have without this immediate access. While answering legitimate questions electronically may simply be time consuming, it is even more stressful when electronic pleas for extra credit opportunities, grade changes, and assistance with personal problems proliferate online (Duran, Kelly, & Keaton, 2005). Many professors also report that they have little time to keep up with changing trends in technology, and that their institutions fail to provide them with adequate technological support (Beam, Eunseong & Voakes, 2003; Piwinsky, Leidman, & McKeague, 2010).

The movement towards Distance Education can also increase stress in teachers who report feeling that some online students expect them to be available on a 24-hour basis (McLean, 2006).

Further complicating the situation is the fact that college students are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, educational background, academic and career goals (NASPA, 2008). While such advances bode well for society as a whole, in practice this can complicate teaching. The same classes often include students from a variety of backgrounds. Some may be well prepared for college, while others are less so as a result of their high school experiences. Others may be transfer or non-traditional students, who have often been out of school for significant periods of time. As a result, instructors can find it difficult to provide a learning environment that both challenges the brightest students, and engages those who are having difficulty. If the faculty member has also internalized the belief that teaching is a motivational calling that obligates them to inspire their students to ever-greater achievements, it can be overwhelming (Brookfield, 2006).

Professors may also struggle with the disparity between their devotion to academics and their students' more prosaic approach to school. Many students today view college as a hurdle they have to overcome to achieve economic success, rather than a learning

opportunity (Astin, 1999; Huston, 2009). On the other hand, faculty members tend to be people for whom reading, writing, and learning come relatively easily (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). Consequently, they may find it difficult to believe that other people aren't as fascinated by their discipline as they are.

Unfortunately, this can create a gulf between students and professors. Students may view faculty members as impractical or unsympathetic to their goals while faculty members sometimes feel that students don't understand or respect the effort they have put into becoming an expert in their field. I get particularly frustrated by students who start putting their materials away before the period is over, setting off a chain reaction. One afternoon I commented that it makes me feel as though they are making a negative statement about the quality of my class. Later a student came to my office and apologized saying that he sometimes leaves early because he needs to get to work but that he "hadn't realized that it might hurt my feelings." When this dynamic disintegrates into incivility on the part of either teachers or students, the ability to work together to create learning is seriously eroded.

Conflict over grading policies can also exacerbate stress and incivility (Gmelch, 1993). Students, who are accustomed to some high school settings where teachers provide explicit reviews of material, leave time in class to work problems or discuss projects, and often offer extra credit opportunities or chances to rewrite or retake tests, can feel that their teachers are unnecessarily rigid. In turn, faculty members are often frustrated by students who focus solely on their grade, argue for extra points and extra credit while missing classes, fail to read assignments, and ignore tutoring and academic support services (Knepp & Frey, 2012). Furthermore, students frequently fail to understand what they don't know about a subject, and yet overestimate the extent of their knowledge and the quality of their writing and test performance (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). I once had a student tell me that the reason she failed to earn the grade she wanted was because the exam "didn't reflect what she knew." Unfortunately, when the pressure students feel to get good grades, to maintain scholarships and financial aid, and to gain access to post-graduate opportunities clashes with faculty members' attempts to maintain academic standards while promoting learning, the encounters can be heated, uncomfortable, and stressful for all involved (Gilroy, 2008).

Managing Your Own Stress and Mental Health

In short, teaching in today's colleges often feels more like 'swimming upstream' than living in an ivory tower. As the gap widens between what faculty members expect or envision from their job and the reality of the complicated demands they face, many find themselves increasingly stressed and overwhelmed. However, College professors are seldom trained to focus on their own physical and psychological well-being. Certainly people, who were willing to attend college for 6 or more years, while accumulating financial and sleep debts, are not likely to focus on self-care when they take an academic position. In addition, professors often believe they must appear in control to their students and colleagues, and live in fear that they will eventually be revealed as "imposters" who don't really have the necessary skills to teach (Brookfield, 2006). Such beliefs can then lead to reluctance to consult with colleagues about teaching stress.

Unfortunately, failing to do so can have a negative impact on the teacher's mental, physical, and professional career.

For example, when I first started teaching I used to feel both aggravated and worried when students slept during my class. My assumption was that I was failing to engage their attention, and so must not be teaching very well. Eventually though, I started asking students why they were so tired. One told me he was moonlighting as a phlebotomist to support his mentally ill mother and younger brother, and another was driving a charter bus all night, and then trying to come to class. Once I stopped interpreting their behavior as a reflection of my teaching skills, I was able to focus on helping them find ways to be more effective students. In fact, the former phlebotomist was able to find some additional sources of student aid, and is now a physician. The former bus driver went on to be a manager with the bus company.

Fortunately, research on stress and coping in general has generated a number of techniques which faculty can readily apply to managing teaching stress. The work of physician Aaron Beck (Butler & Beck, 2000), and psychologist Albert Ellis (1975), typically referred to as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), suggests that people have characteristic thoughts that are associated with particular feelings when confronted with stressful events, but that they may not be consciously aware of these links. Such thoughts, called irrational or dysfunctional beliefs, often involve concerns about achievement and judgments by others. They tend to occur rapidly and automatically when we are confronted with a challenge (Dobson, 2012).

Faculty members who apply such rigid standards to their own performance in the classroom may believe they have to be caring, competent, and calm at all times, in order to maintain the approval of their students, colleagues, and bosses. However, given the reality of teaching, a faculty member who is predisposed to focus on this constellation of beliefs will inevitably experience occasional stress, disappointment, and frustration. According to the tenets of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, constantly activating automatic thoughts about the failure to live up to their own impossible standards necessarily results in depression, anxiety, and anger. Not surprisingly, such adverse emotions further fuel distress and can result in uncomfortable physiological responses including headaches, shoulder, and jaw pain from tight muscles, gastrointestinal distress, and sleep disruption (McKay, 2011). Some faculty members respond by getting more anxious and trying to work even harder to be the perfect teacher. Others become depressed, burned out, or adversarial towards students. Of course, each of these responses generates its own set of problems in and out of the classroom. Given the complexity of this pattern, learning to manage your own stress effectively may be the only realistic solution (King, 2002).

One activity often prescribed in CBT is to keep a log of stressful events, along with your thoughts, feelings, and responses to the situation. In terms of teaching this can be done by tracking how you feel before, during, and after each class you teach for several weeks. The next step is to practice generating alternative thought patterns and to assess how they might improve or complicate the situation (Clark & Beck, 2011).

Tracking when you are feeling inadequate, insecure, and frustrated can help you identify the accompanying triggers and thoughts. Once you have identified the situations

that are causing your stress (for example dreading a particular class, procrastinating on preparing for it, getting there late and leaving discouraged or agitated) it may be useful to identify what your specific stress triggers are in that situation. Is it discomfort with the topic itself, or the textbook, or the lectures or technology you are using? Is it a certain type of student behavior? Is there a pattern that is occurring across classes?

Sometimes the solution is surprisingly practical. Reworking lectures, asking students for feedback, and getting help with technology are not signs of weakness; they are signs of willingness to grow as a teacher. I used to dread writing tests and finalizing my syllabi, because I always seem to miss a typo. After recognizing the problem, I started asking the class to tell me when they find the inevitable error, so it won't affect their understanding of the course or the exam. In some classes it became a running joke, but they actually like catching my mistakes.

The problem can also be situational. If the classroom is dark, awkward, or uncomfortable it can actually have an adverse effect on learning (Chism & Bickford, 2002). Although you may not be able to reconfigure a room, you can see if you are able to change classes, move chairs, or simply acknowledge to students that you know that the conditions in the room are less than ideal. Figuring out how to bring such problems to the attention of administrators and campus planners can also be empowering.

If the stress involves interpersonal conflict you can then work on identifying the types of interactions that push your buttons. Once you determine exactly what the factors are, it is far easier to figure out how to change your responses. I will always remember a student in my Abnormal Psychology class who often came to my office to argue about a single point on a test in which he had already gotten an A. I had written him off as an entitled, contentious young man until the day I lectured on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and he came to me after class and asked what he should do if he thought that might be his problem. Once I understood what was going on, it was far easier for me to avoid taking his comments personally. He happily followed my suggestion that he go to our counseling center, and later reported that he was managing his obsessions far more effectively. Gillihan (2016) has written a useful guide for implementing a self-driven Cognitive-Behavioral change plan.

Unfortunately though, sometimes there aren't easy ways to avoid the things that trigger your stress. In such cases you may be stuck with altering your expectations, rather than the situation. Given that it is impossible to know everything and please everyone in the classroom, how can you define your goals in reasonable terms, and take better care of yourself? Do you need to focus on sleeping, exercising, or eating better so you have more energy to cope? Could you do some things outside of work to relax and escape from the stress you can't change? Ironically, once people stop wishing that a situation was different, and focus on what they want to have happen, their stress levels often diminish significantly, even before the situation changes (Emery & Campbell, 1987).

For professors, this can mean accepting the fact that many students have far different academic goals than we do. This perspective shift then enables faculty members to spend more time trying to understand how and why their students' outlooks differ from their own. In an ever-changing world, recognizing your sources of stress and

learning how to address them cognitively is a key component of good mental health. In my research, I think of stress as the gap between what you have and what you want. In life, as in academia, there are often external factors we can't change. What you can control is the way you think about the situation, as well as how you choose to respond (McNaughton-Cassill, 2013). I have co-opted the phrase "Mind the Gap" from British warnings to be careful when stepping onto a train to remind myself and my students that we can always reduce the ways in which we let the gap affect us.

Although many of us think about coping in terms of dealing with adverse events that have already happened, more recent coping theories focus on how people respond to future threats. Research in this area suggests that one of the most effective ways to deal with stress is to view stressful events as challenges rather than threats. This approach, called proactive coping, is associated with positive mental adjustment in the face of stress (Greenglass, 2002). In terms of teaching, this suggests that difficult students or teaching situations can be an impetus to focus on growing as a teacher. When the responses to your teaching are positive, it is incredibly rewarding, but when the feedback is negative, it is important to use that information to refine your skills instead of blaming yourself or give up on the endeavor altogether. Teaching, like any skill, requires focus, practice, and feedback.

Consequently, you may also need to focus on identifying sources of support on campus including discussion groups, seminars, or other venues where you can talk honestly about teaching. Research on stress and social support suggests that when dealing with stress ranging from illness, to job or relationship loss, to war or natural disaster, those who have the support of people in their lives who can provide material support, advice, emotional support, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to exchange support, fare better.

In the context of teaching, this can translate into actively seeking mentoring and being willing to talk to others about your teaching. Although most of us would agree that we would not expect someone to perform well in a sporting event without a coach, we rarely acknowledge the need for the same type of coaching in the classroom. Teaching is not a skill you learn and then do the same way indefinitely. It is a dynamic process, with constant challenges and opportunities for growth. In a tribute to one of her former mentors Catherine McLaughlin (2010) provides a nice summary of the benefits of finding and providing effective faculty mentoring.

In conclusion, managing the interpersonal dynamics in a classroom, creating a cooperative learning environment, and coping with your own response to stress is no easy task. But, teaching at its best is a transformative experience for both teachers and learners. The key is realizing that people are complex intellectual and social organisms, not machines exchanging data. The reality is that teaching well is as difficult and complex as rocket science, which never would have been possible without the efforts of generations of dedicated teachers.

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