

CHAPTER 1

Background and Rationale

What causes people to experience negative emotions like stress, sadness, or anger? Do events cause emotions? That is, are emotions caused by what happens to us? The answer may surprise you and is the foundation for understanding how to manage our emotional experiences. Before we provide an answer, consider the following scenario:

At a faculty meeting at Riley Elementary School, the principal announces that she will make weekly observations in every teacher's classroom for the remainder of the school year. Three teachers at the school have very different emotional reactions to the news. Ms. Malcolm feels inspired and excited about the announcement, Mr. Gonzalez feels anxious, and Ms. Phipps feels angry. They all experienced the exact same event, yet their emotional reactions were completely different.

Do events, or the things that happen to us, cause our feelings? The short answer is no. Events can trigger a series of reactions, but they do not, in themselves, cause us to feel certain ways. The same event can lead to a range of reactions in different people. Something more immediate determines our emotional reaction. This is good news, because if our emotional lives were solely determined by events we would all be at the mercy of every event that occurs.

So if not events, what has a more direct impact on how we feel? And equally important, is it something we can control? The short answer is yes. We describe the long answer in the remainder of this book.

ASSAULT ON TEACHERS: STORIES OF TEACHERS IN THE ACCOUNTABILITY ERA

Teaching can be a stressful profession. Nearly half of all new teachers leave the field within five years of receiving their degrees, many citing the reason for leaving as ongoing chal-

lenges and stressors in the school environment (Ingersoll, 2002). Teachers often bear the brunt of the burden created by the growing emphasis on accountability, where the focus is

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on student outcomes, leaving little time or attention for teacher well-being. At the same time, it is clear that stress interferes with teacher performance, thus making positive outcomes less likely in classrooms where teachers do not cope well.

“Every day I feel under attack. Sometimes it feels like nobody respects teachers anymore. At work, many students and parents don’t seem to respect us. Even worse, it seems like every time I pick up a paper or turn on the news there is a story about what’s wrong with teachers. It’s as if society expects us to solve all the world’s problems and blames us when we don’t.” —EIGHTH-GRADE TEACHER

We have had the privilege to work with hundreds of teachers over the years and to listen to their stories. It seems that regardless of the purpose of our visits or workshops, conversations always seem to drift to the topic of teacher stress and coping. We have been struck by how powerful and consistent these stories are, and how most teachers have experienced mounting pressure and lessening support over the past decade. Throughout the book we return to these stories to guide our examples of teacher work-related stress.

CHALLENGES AND IRONIES

The irony is that these experiences of teachers, and the high pressure society puts on them, undermine the qualities that teachers need to be effective. Teaching has always been a challenging job, only more so recently. With any challenging job, it is essential to have time to

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focus, relax, and reflect. This is especially true for teachers, because their daily interactions can have profound effects on the children in their classroom. Teachers may project their stress onto their students, making it more likely that students will experience stress themselves, and, thereby less likely they will be open to learning.

There is a wealth of literature that has documented the importance of positive teaching (see Reinke, Herman, & Sprick, 2011). Effective classroom management begins with a calm, warm, and affirming teacher who can deliver high rates of positive attention to students when they are meeting expectations and composed, brief redirections when needed. When teachers are stressed, they are less able to provide the type of environment we know is conducive to learning and to support children’s social and emotional development.

WHAT'S A TEACHER TO DO?

Based on the climate of education in the United States and the challenges many teachers encounter, it is tempting to conclude that excessive teacher stress is inevitable and that teachers are helpless to reduce it. If that were true, this would turn out to be a very boring and impractical book. The reality is that despite all the changes in education and the daily stressors and hassles teachers experience, there remains great variability in how well a teacher will function and cope. Some teachers continue to flourish, even in this challenging environment, while others feel overwhelmed.

We all possess tendencies to act and think in certain ways, but we can learn to adapt how we act and think.

Let us return to the example from the beginning of this chapter. Recall that three teachers had very different reactions to the announcement that they would be subject to weekly performance evaluations. Same event, three diverse stress experiences; so the event by itself cannot explain why people feel a particular way. If not the event, then what accounts for different emotional reactions? Think for a moment why Ms. Malcolm might be feeling inspired and excited about having weekly performance observations. Why does Mr. Gonzalez feel anxious about this news? What could explain why Ms. Phipps feels angry?

If you answered these questions with some version of “because of the way he or she was thinking about the observations,” we like the way you are thinking! Ms. Malcolm feels excited about the prospect of being observed in her classroom because she is viewing it as an opportunity, perhaps to learn more about herself, to improve her teaching, or simply to have more interaction with her principal. She is thinking about the event in a positive way.

In contrast, Mr. Gonzalez and Ms. Phipps are clearly thinking about the event (the announcement of weekly observations) in a negative manner, but in slightly different ways. We know this because they have different negative emotions to the same event. This is important to notice because our specific emotional reactions are always tied to the very particular way we are thinking about events in our lives. Mr. Gonzalez is feeling anxious about the news, so he is focusing his thoughts on some aspect of the event that makes him feel vulnerable. Perhaps he thinks that his principal will discover his flaws as a teacher, give him a poor evaluation and recommend a remediation plan, or even that the observations may ultimately lead to his being fired. The more serious the worry in his head, the more intensely he will experience the feeling. For instance, if at his core he believes he is a defective teacher, an imposter who is at risk of being fired, he will likely experience very intense anxiety in response to this announcement. Only Mr. Gonzalez knows for sure which thoughts most trouble him, and he will only realize this if he takes time to reflect on his thoughts in ways that we teach you in this book. Based on our impressions of how he is feeling, though, we can guess the types of thoughts he is likely to have.

Finally, Ms. Malcolm is angry, so her most immediate thoughts are not about her vulnerability but rather about feeling bothered or attacked by the news. Some thoughts that might go along with her anger could be that she is annoyed that the principal is inconveniencing

her with visits to her class, or perhaps she does not respect her principal and believes she has no right to judge the quality of her teaching. Again, only Ms. Malcom knows for sure, but the nature of her emotional response gives her clues as to the type of thoughts that go along with those emotions.

In summary, we have three people experiencing three very different emotions related to the same event, and these emotions arise and persist largely because of how each of them thinks about the event. Now the question is, are they all at the mercy of their thoughts? Are they just hardwired to think in these ways with no hope of altering their thinking and, in turn, their emotions? Fortunately, no. We all possess tendencies to act and think in certain ways, but we can learn to adapt how we act and think. Decades of research has demonstrated this fact (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; Clark & Beck, 2010).

The skills described in this book teach you new ways of thinking and acting that make it more likely for you to manage stress at work and in life better. The key skill to focus on is the ability first to be aware of your feelings, thoughts, and actions. Once you are conscious of those, you will have a greater capacity to adapt to the stressors you face on a daily basis. The skills required to think about events differently or to choose different courses of action naturally follow from this type of self-awareness.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

This book is designed to provide a framework for understanding common stressors in schools and practical strategies for coping with these stressors. The goal is to describe practical strategies to bolster effective coping responses of teachers. A secondary goal is to provide a framework for administrators, school mental professionals, and even teachers to create an environment for promoting effective coping of school professionals.

Part I provides a background and rationale for the book including definitions of key terms (stress, coping) and an overarching model for understanding the strategies that we present in subsequent chapters. This section briefly reviews the theory and research that underlies all the strategies in the book. In addition, it presents stories in the voice of teachers of how they experience unparalleled stressors in their work. Embedded throughout the text, these stories provide real-life examples of teachers and their efforts to cope with the demands of their job.

Part II provides specific coping strategies within each area of the model. It starts with a focus on mood monitoring, as this is the most accessible skill for developing awareness needed to interrupt the stress cycle. The next three chapters discuss coping responses within two categories: cognitive coping and adaptive behaviors. Throughout this section, we provide real examples of teachers who use these methods to reduce their stressors and then suggest specific application exercises for the reader to practice the skills. In addition, Part II builds on these basic skills in order to encourage readers to go beyond stress reduction and build toward even more positive outcomes (e.g., the absence of illness is not the same thing as health). Chapter 8, Competence and Self-Efficacy, focuses on improving the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom, a critical aspect of stress reduction. We show the connection

between teaching competence, self-beliefs, and stress, and then highlight critical areas of competence for all teachers to improve on. In addition, we describe strategies and resources for improving teaching competence (including topics discussed in other books in the Practical Interventions for Schools Series). The section ends with a chapter on facilitating even more positive outcomes, including happiness, satisfaction, and mindfulness.

Part III extends the core concepts of the model to include other applications and the broader school context. For instance, Chapter 11 focuses on more serious problems (depression, substance abuse) that go beyond the primary focus of the book but are common consequences of persistent stressors. Chapter 12 focuses on other school personnel (administrators and other school staff) and how they can promote a positive coping environment. Because these skills lend themselves to social discussion, Chapter 13 discusses how to set up a reading group with colleagues and strategies for making such a group successful. Chapter 14 focuses on broader systems change and acknowledges that individual coping is important, but it is always situated within broader contexts that influence these responses.

In this book we intend to produce five primary outcomes:

1. Provide a rationale for promoting effective coping in teachers.
2. Provide a practical model for supporting teacher use of effective coping strategies.
3. Describe specific cognitive and behavioral strategies for improving teacher coping.
4. Extend the model and strategies to include promoting broader outcomes beyond stress reduction, including happiness and well-being.
5. Provide suggestions for administrators and other school personnel to support teachers and promote an effective coping environment.

POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS OF THIS BOOK

We wrote this book with a range of applications in mind. Our overarching goal is to provide teachers and their colleagues with a well-established framework for improving their coping and problem-solving skills and, therefore, improve their ability to manage the inevitable stressors of their jobs. Within this goal we anticipate at least four potential ways to use the book. First, we intend the book to be a resource for any K–12 (possibly even PreK) inservice and preservice teacher to use as a self-improvement guide. The strategies we describe have been used and described in other self-improvement-oriented books for other audiences (David Burns's bestseller *Feeling Good* [1999] is an excellent example). Research shows that individuals can use these skills described in such books to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (e.g., see Cuijpers, 1997, 1998). A second use of the book is in groups of teachers in such formats as teacher book clubs, resource meetings, or workshops led by professionals within the school (school psychologists, school counselors) or by teachers themselves. Third, the book is a resource for other professionals in schools who interact with teachers and whose role, at least in part, is to support teachers. These individuals include administrators who seek strategies to foster a less stressful work environment and effective interactions with teachers, as well as other teachers, school psychologists, and special educators who

struggle with how best to support teachers who are stressed and/or burned out by their jobs. Fourth, we see the potential to use the book in preservice courses for teachers. The book is a helpful supplemental reading for practicum and other training encounters in which preservice teachers may experience high levels of stress.

SPECIAL FEATURES

We have included two special features to the book to help you get the most out of it. First, in each chapter we have a section called “If You Do Only One Thing.” We recognize that you are busy and that you may be reluctant to commit to doing all of the activities in each chapter. Although we hope that you do all activities, we wanted to be sure to highlight one activity in each chapter that will give you the biggest bang for your buck. The activities described in the “If You Do Only One Thing” sections are proven methods for giving a positive boost to your mood. As with any skill, the benefits will only last as long as you use the method. But we hope by showing you the power of these tools that it will catch your attention and motivate you to return to the book for more exercise and practice.

Second, for those of you who choose to use the book as part of a class or a study group, we have a section in each chapter called “Group Activities.” These are special adaptations of the methods for groups to capitalize on the power of group process. At the end of the book, we give special focus to planning study groups and helping ensure their success, so if you are going to use the book in a study group, this chapter might be a good place to start.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

How do you know whether this book is for you, and how can you best use it to maximize your potential? As we note, if you are a school professional who works with colleagues

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who are stressed and you would like to provide support, you can use the resources presented in this book. If you are a school professional who experiences stress and would like help reducing it, then this book can be useful for you.

A helpful starting point is to complete a quick self-assessment about your current levels of stress and coping. We’ll start with a simple one in this chapter and will include several more detailed assessments in subsequent chapters. To start, answer the following two questions about your current level of stress and coping.

1. How stressful is your job?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not Stressful

Very Stressful

2. How well are you coping with the stress of your job right now?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Not Well *Very Well*

We recently asked 121 teachers these same questions and then compared their answers to other survey results they provided about topics like burnout and self-efficacy (Hickmon, Reinke, & Herman, 2013). We also collected objective ratings of disruptive behaviors and academic achievement of students in their classrooms. Based on these data, we were able to conclude something that probably will not surprise you. The vast majority of teachers report high levels of work-related stress. Only 7% of teachers fit a profile characterized by low levels of stress and high levels of positive coping. The rest were characterized by above-average stress ratings (scores of 6 or higher). Compared to teachers in the low-stress group, teachers who fell into any group with above-average stress scores reported lower levels of self-efficacy and confidence in their teaching and higher levels of burnout.

Based on our findings, if you answered question 1 with a rating of 6 or higher, we are confident that some of the skills and strategies in this book can help you. Depending on how stressed you feel, you may be able to pick and choose certain skills throughout the book that better fit your needs. If you rated yourself lower than a 6, that's great! Take time to complete some of the more detailed assessments in Chapters 2 and 3 to get a better sense of your overall stress and coping as well as related symptoms and vulnerabilities. These allow you to assess the parts of the book that apply to your needs.

The second question is helpful in further distinguishing the impact of teachers' stress on their job performance. Teachers who fit a profile of high stress and low coping not only suffer inside because of their stress, but also it shows in their classrooms. These teachers report the lowest ratings of confidence and efficacy in the classroom, the highest rates of student disruptive behaviors, and the lowest rates of student adaptive behaviors. Perhaps most concerning, this translates into worse academic performance for their students on standardized achievement tests. Based on these findings, if you answered question 2 with a rating of 6 or lower, the skills throughout the book are especially relevant to you. In order to determine your specific needs and areas for skill development, you should read each chapter and complete each self-assessment.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Now that you have a sense of the areas and topics in this book that best fit you and you have a plan for moving forward, you probably would like to know, "Will it work?" Can reading a book actually help you learn new skills and reduce your stress or improve your mood? We can answer with a confident absolutely! Many studies have examined this question about whether bibliotherapy, as it is called in research articles, works. Several studies show that bibliotherapy works for a variety of problems and topics. For instance, one line of research

shows that bibliotherapy is an effective treatment for mild to moderate depression and anxiety (Cuijpers, 1997, 1998). Other research has shown that people can use the tools in books to reduce their stress and increase coping behaviors.

Of course, not all books are created equal, and not all books are based on the science that led to these discoveries. We wrote this book based on the established science in bibliotherapy, using the theories and strategies that prior studies found most helpful in producing positive changes for readers.

An important detail to mention is that in order to achieve the results found in these studies, a couple things need to happen. First, you actually need to read the book. Simply owning or possessing it does not have any benefit to you unless you actively read it. Second, information alone is probably not enough to create lasting change for you. You need to complete some exercises and activities to learn the strategies and apply them in your life. Like any new skill, learning new ways to think or act requires practice. As they say, the more you put into it, the more you will get out of it. Finally, approach the book and the activities in it like a scientist. Not everything will work for you, but some things will. Undoubtedly, you will already be good at some skills described in the book. That's great. Pay attention to these as your skills and resources to build upon. Your job is to find which new skills are most important for you to adopt in order to become even more effective at coping with stress. Try them, test your hypotheses as whether they are helpful or not, be open to what you will find, and then monitor what works. At the end of the book, you will have several new skills that you can use in the future.