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Using Psychology in the Classroom

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9

Stress and Stress Management for Teachers and Educators

The goal for this chapter is to provide the reader with an introduction to stress, its causes and manifestations, and how it can be managed by teachers and educators in themselves and others. We shall consider both the *physiology* and *psychology of stress*. Having completed this general overview, we then examine *psychological and physical ways of coping with stress*, and *stress and the teaching profession: avoiding burnout*. This chapter concludes with a reflective examination of some *implications for educators*, *questions for discussion*, and a short annotated list of *further reading.*

The Physiology of Stress

All forms of strong human emotional arousal, including psychological stress, are physiologically associated with what is known as the *alarm response*, which in itself is underpinned by the activity of the autonomic nervous system. The human nervous system (the brain, spinal chord and all other nervous tissue in the body) may be divided on the basis of either *structure* (location) or *function*. Structurally, a division is made between the *central* (brain and spinal chord) and *peripheral* (everything else) nervous systems. Functionally, the first division that one can make is between the *voluntary* and *involuntary* (also known as *autonomic*) nervous systems.

The autonomic nervous system can be divided into the parasympathetic (which is active when the organism is at rest) and the sympathetic branch (which primes the organism for attacking or evasive action). The major sympathetic responses are *increases* in the diameter of pupil, heart rate, breathing rate, blood supply to the limbs, muscular tension and the release of adrenalin, and *decreases* in the blood supply to the viscera, the capacity of bladder, and the rate of peristalsis. Exactly the same set of nervous/hormonal responses is operational in the bodies of both carnivorous (hunting) and herbivorous (hunted) animals in predator/prey behaviour. This is why this response is sometimes known as the *fight/flight* response (Gleitman, 2010), reflecting its 'biological utility'. As we have already seen, it is also known as the 'alarm response'; it is sometimes known as the *autonomic response* or the *sympathetic response*; and in certain clinical settings, as the *orientating response*. (The reader can perhaps understand why I advised the purchase of a dictionary of psychology early on in this text.) Humans show the same response when afraid, angry, stressed, excited (i.e. emotionally charged in any way), but as we are conscious animals, we *cognitively label* our emotions depending on context. Hence, we *don't* feel stress, then experience an alarm response; we *do* experience an alarm response and interpret this as stress (Gleitman, 2010).

Understanding the Psychology of Stress

Can the Content of Emotions be Understood?

Towards the end of his *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (1987; the deliberately provocative title comes from a declension category in Dyirbal, an Australian aboriginal language), George Lakoff argues that:

> Emotions are often viewed as feelings devoid of any conceptual content. But in addition to feeling, we also impose an understanding on what it is that we feel (p. 377) . . . A topic such as the logic of emotions would seem to be a contradiction in terms . . . I would like to argue that the opposite is true, that emotions have an extremely complex conceptual structure, which gives rise to a wide variety of non-trivial inferences. (p. 380)

Lakoff (1987) provides an analysis of the wide variety of verbal expressions used in modern (American) English when people talk about *anger*, beginning with a consideration of what he calls the 'folk theory' of the physiological effects of anger:

- The physiological effects of anger are increased body heat, increased internal pressure [blood pressure, muscular pressure, agitation and interference with accurate perception].
- As anger increases, its physiological effects increase.
- There is a limit beyond which the physiological effects of anger impair normal functioning.

This folk theory yields a system of metonymies for anger: *body heat* ('Don't get hot under the collar'), *internal pressure* ('When I found out, I almost burst a blood vessel'), *redness in the face and neck area* ('She was scarlet with rage'), *agitation* ('She was shaking with anger') and *interference with accurate perception* ('She was blind with rage'). This gives rise to what Lakoff calls the 'most general metaphor for anger': *anger is heat*, either applied to *solids* ('After the argument, Dave was smouldering for days') or *fluids in a container* (a general metaphor for the body is *a container for the emotions* – hence, 'I had reached the boiling point'). There are other principal metaphors for anger, too: *insanity* ('You're driving me crazy!'), an *opponent in a struggle* ('I've been wrestling with my anger all day'), a *dangerous animal* ('He unleashed his anger'), a *physical annoyance* ('Don't be a pain in the ass'), *trespassing* ('This is where I draw the line!') and a *burden* ('He has a chip on his shoulder'). These metaphors and metonyms, according to Lakoff, 'converge on a certain prototypical cognitive model of anger' (p. 397–398):

- Stage One: Offending Event
- Stage Two: Anger
- Stage Three: Attempt at Control
- Stage Four: Loss of Control
- Stage Five: Act of Retribution

The act of retribution must equal to the original offending event in terms of intensity in order for the scales to be balanced again, and the intensity of anger level to return to zero (Lakoff, 1987). He notes that he has 'shown that the expressions that indicate anger in American English are not a random collection but rather are structured in terms of an elaborate cognitive model that is implicit in the semantics of the language.'

Attempting to Understand the Conceptual Content of Stress through Linguistic Analysis

You could try a similar exercise to that of Lakoff's (above) in a discussion group, or perhaps even in a class with young people as a facilitated brain-storming session. Work from generating idioms referring to stress (rather than anger), and see if similar 'principal metaphors' appear. Is it possible to build up a 'prototypical cognitive model of stress', as Lakoff did for anger? Would you agree that, having read about anger and experimented yourself with stress as exemplifiers, 'emotions have an extremely complex conceptual structure, which gives rise to a wide variety of non-trivial inferences' (Lakoff, 1987, p. 380)?

Lakoff's approach to understanding the conceptual content of emotions is an interesting and innovative one. However, in terms of understanding stress in particular, most researchers have made reference to the biological aspects discussed in the section on 'The Physiology of Stress' (above). It is to this type of research that we now turn our attention.

Early Approaches to Understanding Psychological Stress

The first approach to understanding psychological stress was made by a Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist called Hans Selye (1907–1982), who wrote the enormously influential *The Stress of Life* (1956). Using Walter Cannon's work on *homeostasis* (1932) – the idea that the living organism has mechanisms which regulate its internal environment in order to maintain a stable, constant condition – Selye (1956) proposed the now well-known General Adaption Syndrome (GAS) as a set of responses that exist when an organism is exposed to stress. The GAS has three phases: *alarm* (when we register the existence of a threat; here, adrenaline is released by the body in order to trigger and maintain the 'fight/flight' response); *resistance* (if the threat remains, we attempt to adapt or act in order to cope with it); and *exhaustion* (as we cannot cope indefinitely, our body's resources become depleted). The exhaustion phase, involving as it does long-term sympathetic autonomic nervous activity, leads to the development of stress-related symptoms and illnesses, such as digestive problems (including peptic ulcers), cardiovascular problems, diabetes, and mental health problems (such as anxiety and depression) (Selye, 1956, 1975).

In 1975, Selye published a paper in which he proposed that a difference exists between negative stress, which he termed *distress*, and positive stress, *eustress*, according to how we perceive a stressor (a thing that causes stress). Eustress is that which serves to enhance mental and physical functioning; therefore, includes that which can be seen as 'challenges', rather than threats. The idea that how we think about, or 'appraise', stressors is important had already been argued by another influential author in stress research, Richard Lazarus. In his *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (1966), both internal factors – personality, life experience, coping-styles and so on – and external factors (features of the stressor itself) are important in determining whether a stimulus will be appraised by an individual as a stressor or not (*primary appraisal*). What then follows is a *secondary appraisal* – an individual's assessment of whether he or she has sufficient resources to cope, which then in turn may affect the primary appraisal. Further to this, the person will attempt different coping strategies; these may be revised according to his or her assessment of how effective they are.

Lazarus' approach, although influential upon later theorists, caught the popular imagination at the time rather less than did an attempt to develop lists of items that were stressful to *all* people. Holmes and Rahe (1967) published the first version of their *Social Readjustment Rating Scale* (SRRS), based originally on the medical records of 5,000 medical patients, in which 43 stressful events that can contribute to illness are ranked in terms of 'life-change units' from 100 downwards. The death of a spouse is given the highest 'life-change units' rating (100); next is divorce (73), then marital separation (65) and imprisonment (63), and so on, down to 'change in sleeping habits' (16) and 'Christmas' (12). In order to measure stress according to the SRSS scale, one adds up the number of 'life-change units' that have applied to an individual in the past 12 months. Over 300 means that there is a definite risk of stress-induced illness; 150–299 means that there is a moderate risk of stress-induced illness; and a score of less than 150 means that there is a slight risk of stress-induced illness (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Naturally, such lists (although intriguing) would seem to have weaknesses which are very readily exposed using Lazarus' arguments, which show that what is stressful to person A at one point in time is not necessarily what is stressful to him or her at another point in time, or to person B at all. Nevertheless, Holmes and Rahe's (1967) approach remains a popular one, and influential in many 'stress tests' that have been developed, particularly in the realms of popular psychology.

The Importance of Choices: Learned Helplessness

As we have seen, Selye (1956, 1975) provided a number of examples of what happens to human beings *medically* as they struggle with stress. But what can happen *psychologically*? One example is *learned helplessness*. This term is used in animal and human psychology to refer to a condition where an organism has learned to behave helplessly, even when the opportunity is restored for it to help itself by avoiding an unpleasant or harmful circumstance to which it has been subjected. It results from a perceived *absence of control over the outcome of a situation*. The theory dates to Martin Seligman and Steven Maier's (1967) experiments, where initially three groups of dogs were placed in harnesses. Dogs in Group One were simply put in the harnesses for a period of time and later released. Groups Two and Three consisted of 'yoked pairs'. A dog in Group 2 would be intentionally subjected to pain by being given electric shocks, which the dog could end by pressing a lever. A Group 3 dog was wired in parallel with a Group 2 dog, receiving shocks of identical intensity and duration, but his lever didn't stop the electric shocks. To a dog in Group 3, it seemed that the shock ended at random, because it was his paired dog in Group 2 that was causing it to stop. For Group 3 dogs, the shock was apparently 'inescapable'. Group 1 and Group 2 dogs quickly recovered from the experience, but Group 3 dogs learned to be helpless. In part two of the Seligman and Maier experiment, these three groups of dogs were tested in a shuttle-box apparatus, in which the dogs could escape electric shocks by jumping over a low partition. For the most part, the Group 3 dogs, who had previously 'learned' that nothing they did had any effect on the shocks, simply lay down passively and whined. Even though they could have easily escaped the shocks, the dogs did not attempt to do so (Seligman, 1975; Seligman and Maier, 1967).

Gleitman (2010) has commented on how 'learned helplessness' may explain the phenomenon of prisoners who had been liberated from the Nazi concentration camps remaining 'behind the wire', unable to comprehend their freedom, and having been conditioned into a system where their own actions had no effect whatsoever on their own survival prospects. Learned helplessness is presented here, because it can also account for *poor motivation* amongst *vulnerable children at school*. Individuals who have failed at tasks in the past conclude erroneously that they are incapable of improving their performance. This might set children behind in academic subjects and dampen their social skills (Stipek, 1988). Children with learned helplessness typically fail academic subjects, and are less intrinsically motivated than others. They may use learned helplessness as an excuse or a shield to provide self-justification for school failure. Additionally, describing someone as having learned to be helpless can serve as a reason to avoid blaming him or her for the inconveniences experienced. In turn, the student will give up trying to gain respect or advancement through academic performance (Ramirez et al. 1992). Learned helplessness, a concept rooted in the belief that the way in which we are rewarded or otherwise shapes our behaviour, could accordingly be combated by making positive reinforcements absolutely regular, and in the mean time showing great patience as the previously learnt behaviour diminishes. One of those who was liberated from Auschwitz, Primo Levi (1996), reported that it took many months of freedom before he lost the habit he had acquired in the camp of scanning the ground immediately in front of him for 'something' – any object of use or value. By extension, it may take many months for an emotionally neglected or traumatised child who has learned helplessness to understand that in *this* classroom, in *this* environment, his or her efforts will win him or her credit, but only the consistent experience of the teacher reinforcing his or her efforts will teach him or her that this is in fact the case.

A Cognitive/Psychophysiological Model of Stress

Psychologists have generated many models of psychological stress. I would like to describe just one, which I believe is a particularly useful one, given the course of the material this chapter, and in particular the latter half. It was produced and used by two of my former academic supervisors, the University of Glasgow's John Hinton and Richard Burton (1992, 1997, 2001a). The basic principle of this model is, at the centre, that there is a cognitive evaluation of whether one possesses more resources than demands. If demands on one outweigh one's resources, then one experiences the incapacity to cope – known as 'PCI' (perceived coping incapacity), and reminiscent of Lazarus, 1966, see above. One then experiences psychological stress (or, as Hinton and Burton, 1992, 1997, 2001a, 2001b term it, 'psystress'). Perceived coping incapacity is, of course, a subjective measure that varies between individuals. In Hinton and Burton's model (1992, 1997) as well as balancing 'resources' against 'demands', there are differentiations between 'perceived resources' and 'actual resources', and 'perceived demands' and 'actual demands'. An individual's perception of demands and resources will depend, of course, on people's individual personalities, coping mechanisms and cognitive styles, and may be quite different to what those demands and resources are in reality. Hinton and Burton's model (1992, 1997) also includes attention being given over to the outcome of perceiving an incapacity to cope, or the experience of 'pystress', and how these psychological and physical responses to stress feed into the way in which we perceive our resources and our demands in future. The process is essentially self-accelerating (as Selye's GAS (1956) suggests; see above); one might perceive one's demands as being greater than they actually are, and one's resources as being fewer than they actually are, and therefore become more prone to perceive an incapacity to cope, and therefore experience increasingly greater levels of psychological stress.

One innovative aspect of Hinton and Burton's (1992, 1997, 2001a) overall approach is their attention to the measurement of the psychophysiological correlates of stress. Because our psychological experience of stress is underpinned by the 'fight/flight' response (see above), which, as we have seen, is a co-ordinated nervous and hormonal response, it is possible to measure these physical reactions as signs of tonic (short-term) and chronic (long-term) stress (Hinton, 2001). Such correlates include heart rate, localised blood pulse volume (indications of increased circulation), breathing rate, localised electromyography (a measurement of muscular tension, usually in a specific muscle), skin conductance response (a measurement of perspiration), all of which can be measured in a relatively simple laboratory set-up using polygraph equipment (Andreassi, 2006; Hinton, 2001). Measurements of sodium and potassium ionic concentration in saliva, either whole (Hinton and Burton, 2001b) or parotid saliva (Minton, 1995), give an indication of hormonal changes in the body that result from exposure to especially chronic stress.

Psychological and Physical Ways of Coping with Stress

Insights from Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy

In coping with stress, we can employ strategies from Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), which may itself be applied to any one or combination of problems with which a client may present in psychotherapy (Ellis and Harper, 1975; Ellis and Tafrate, 1999). Albert Ellis (1913–2007) believed that human beings have the tendency to hold beliefs strongly, regardless of whether they are rational or irrational, and it is, by and large, the holding of irrational beliefs that does us damage. Hence, much of the stress, anxiety and depression we experience in life is actually self-inflicted, and down to our telling ourselves that our irrational beliefs about ourselves and the world are true. Much influenced by the philosophy of Stoicism, Ellis frequently quoted Epictetus: people are not disturbed by what happens to them, but by their view of what happens to them (Ellis, 1961, 1962). Although he once publically opined that 'all humans are out of their fucking minds, every one of them' (Green, 2003), Ellis devoted much of his professional life to working with clients as a psychotherapist, and in a 1982 survey of North American psychotherapists was voted the second most influential psychotherapist of all time (behind Carl Rogers, first, but ahead of Sigmund Freud, third) (see Ramirez, 2006). A key part of his REBT is the therapist disputing, and educating the client in how to dispute his own, negative self-statements (Ellis, 1962; Ellis and Harper, 1975).

In his ‘A, B, C’ model of the emotions (Ellis and Tafrate, 1999), Ellis provides a way that we can examine and ‘de-catastrophise’ our negative self-statements (I have illustrated this model with my own pair of examples):

> A = Antecedent Event(s) – something in the world happens to us that upsets us.
- Example 1 – We have a lengthy report to write.
- Example 2 – An intimate romantic relationship breaks down.

> B = Beliefs – note that the antecedent events don’t cause us stress, anxiety or depression in themselves. It is the negative beliefs that we develop in relationship to the antecedent events that causes us to experience such things.
- Example 1 – We tell ourselves that we do not have sufficient time or resources to complete the report; and that whoever is requiring us to do so is being unreasonable.
- Example 2 – Either we tell ourselves that we are blameless and that our former partner is a bad person; or that we are entirely at fault, and that this rejection proves what a useless person that we are.

> C = Consequences – always negative, and as a result of generalisations we have based on the faulty logic of our beliefs (negative self-statements).
- Example 1 – We may end up experiencing difficulties at work.
- Example 2 – We develop skewed expectancies of ourselves and others in relationships; we may end up socially isolated, as we may reject help from others.

> D = Dispute – the therapist (or the person himself, playing his own therapist) uses his or her full powers of logic to deconstruct the faulty beliefs/irrational self-statements.
- Example 1 – Who says we are not able to do the report? Can we find time resources and assistance in helping us to do so?
- Example 2 – Where is the evidence for any one of the irrational beliefs that we have about ourselves or others in relationships? Because one relationship has failed, does that mean all subsequent relationships are doomed to failure from the beginning?

> E = New Philosophy of Life – this is hopefully what emerges from our period of dispute; we can learn from negative experiences, and not be psychologically/socially paralysed by them.

Working with the ‘A, B, C’ of Emotions

In discussion with colleagues if possible, or maybe on your own, try to come up with hypothetical examples of realistic issues that might cause stress in (i) students’ and (ii) teachers’ lives.

Working in pairs if possible, or as a thought exercise if you are working on your own, role-play how you could use Ellis’s ‘A, B, C’ of Emotions approach, as outlined above, in order to address some of the hypothetical issues that you generated.

Physical Ways of Coping with Stress

We may also consider using physical methods of relaxation; because we cognitively label emotions, and the alarm response works on homeostatic biofeedback loops, if left unchecked, stress is self-accelerating. However, we can slow the whole alarm process down by actively relaxing using techniques such as *progressive muscular relaxation* (PMR).

The actual technique of progressive muscular relaxation is really rather simple, which is one reason why it is continually replicated in commercially available formats – for a while, from the 1990s, ‘relaxation tapes/CDs’ became rather popular. The techniques that are narrated via these formats typically involve the listener being encouraged to:

- physically relax
- become aware, mentally and physically, of his or her own breathing, its depth and its rate
- slow down, deepen and control his or her breathing rate
- visualise, in some form or another, muscular tension leaving his or her physical system, sometimes by performing physical exercises of stretching and relaxing individual muscle groups
- work up or down the body – either from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, or vice versa.

Incidentally, some primary teachers of my acquaintance who use these or similar techniques have told me that there are physical benefits to such activities that are specific to them, in as much as they spend a good deal of their working lives putting their adult bodies into furniture and classroom spaces designed for much smaller frames.

Stress and the Teaching Profession: Avoiding Burnout

One of the more persistent complaints that I have heard from teachers in training – pre-service and in-service – is that their profession is perceived as an easy one by the general public. It has sometimes even been assumed that, as a non-teacher, I share this opinion. Let me say here for the record that I certainly do not! I have also heard numerous personal theories of why teaching is perceived as an ‘easy’ profession – erroneous perceptions of short working days and years; the belief that because everyone has been taught, that everyone knows how to teach (many people have been operated on, but few would claim to know more about such procedures than surgeons); and so on. My own belief is that the non-teaching public (and to some extent even teachers themselves) is not adequately aware of precisely *why* education is a profession of high stress and burnout. It is now time, perhaps, to cast a ‘psychological eye’ on why this is the case.

In terms of *burnout*, Heidi Ahonen-Eerikäinen (2002) asserted that the following things were true of the teacher who is in the ‘danger zone’. He or she:

- is ‘gifted, conscientious, and diligent’
- has a career which is ‘a personal crusade to better the world’
- has very high goals and self-expectations
- has ‘incorrectly estimated his or her potential to influence matters’
- ‘sub-consciously hopes to receive positive feedback, thankfulness and admiration from his or her students’
- ‘cannot face the truth that good teaching does not always bring good results’
- is ‘over-responsible, will not define his or her work limits, is always available to everyone, and considers himself or herself irreplaceable’
- ‘offers to carry the burdens of colleagues’
- ‘carries alone the burdens of coping, saving face and all-knowingness’.

If I skim-read this list, I feel alarmed because many (but thankfully not all) of these items seem evident in a good proportion of the student teachers and newly-qualified teachers that I have met and taught in recent years, especially those young teachers who are trying to work their way into achieving permanent positions in schools. Yet, as a psychologist, I realise that there is much truth in this list, and I therefore encourage the reader to think through it.

Ahonen-Eerikäinen (2002) also argued that burnout is tangible in the atmosphere of a workplace; these ‘environmental aspects’ include an almost contagious sense of fatigue and despair, and a staffroom climate that is characterised by competition and internal hierarchy struggles. Those staff members who are having problems may be belittled, teased in a non-good natured way, or outright rejected, which contributes to the anxiety that they are already experiencing. When burnout threatens the entire staff body, all of their strength goes into just coping – this is manifested in long, disorganised meetings, which are characterised by lengthy discussion of unrelated matters; a high turnover of personnel, excessive sick days and increased pressures for permanent staff. Hence, organisational 'symptoms' of burnout include unhealthy competition; games and politics between people; aggression, irritability, inflexibility, dissatisfaction and vengefulness; as the group dynamics no longer work, due to non-confidence in each other, either individual work is emphasise, or responsibility for solutions is transferred entirely to the school management level; staff members not being encouraged or even given the chance to develop themselves. Furthermore, a poor workplace atmosphere may give rise to workplace bullying as one person or a small number of people become scapegoated – he, she or they get bullied and blamed whilst the rest feel that they (as individuals) are performing well (Ahonen-Eerikäinen, 2002).

Naturally, burnout (whether organisational or individual in its genesis) has effects on the individual, too. These individual symptoms include a diminishing of self-confidence as one begins to doubt one's own skills, intelligence and even mental health; and what Ahonen-Eerikäinen (2002) refers to as the *Teachers' Warrior Neurosis*, in which symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder take hold – psychologically, emotional exhaustion, tension, irritability, passiveness, obsessive thought patterns, depression, guilt, cynicism and feelings of estrangement; physically, hypertension, ulcers, migraines, general malaise, aches and pains, use of 'calming medicines' (e.g. sleeping pills) and substance use and abuse.

Individual burnout can be traced in stages; in one model, similar to Selye's GAS (1956, also see above), a *warning stage*, in which the individual attempts to achieve impossible goals, thus over-exerting his or her physical boundaries, is followed by a *distress stage*, in which all of his or her free time is spent working, and fatigue and irritability set in; the subsequent *exhaustion stage* is marked by a change in behaviour and attitude – the individual becomes uninterested, mechanical, inflexible, detached and negative, and students become depersonalised (just 'cases'). In another model, which calls to mind Lakoff's work on understanding the emotions (1987, also see above), a *heating stage*, in which the individual does not receive positive feedback, and the glamour of the chosen career diminishes, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction, rejection and isolation, is followed by a *boiling stage*, marked by diminished self-confidence, and feelings that one cannot accomplish anything, helplessness, meaninglessness, and the doubting of one's own intelligence, capabilities and choice of careers; the final *explosion stage* is one of giving up – a feeling that 'I've had it!' The individual becomes absolutely robotic, releasing pressures anywhere, and comes to see students as ‘the enemy’ who must be conquered daily (Ahonen-Eerikäinen, 2002). Having read Chapter 3 of this text, the reader can perhaps imagine the long-reaching knock-on effects on student self-esteem here.

Having charted the problems so carefully, what does Ahonen-Eerikäinen (2002) see as constituting a potential solution? The key would appear to be in attending to everyday patterns of communication. Blocks to communication exist when people refuse to think about matters, refuse to believe that a given situation is happening, or think along the lines of ‘This will take care of itself’. Consequently, such people’s communication is compromised; they filter information, perhaps saying only what they think the other wants to hear, or are selective in their own understanding. Such compromised communication is characterised by doubletalk, consistent use of comparisons (which interfere with listening), ‘thought-reading’, advice-giving, refusing to try out new ideas (instead, arguing and debating each point), having to always be ‘in the right’, hanging onto one’s principles, and the consistent use of double-bind statements and changing the subject (2002). Genuine communication is marked instead by *active* and *empathic* listening, in which we make an attempt to accurately understand the other person’s perspective, and to ‘tune in’ on his or her ‘wavelength’ – to experience the world in the way in which the other person does. *Direct communication* – marked by the acknowledgement that others cannot, and cannot be expected to read one’s thoughts, or automatically understand us, is also extremely important.

Teaching Stress Management Techniques to Students

Throughout this chapter, we have focused on how stress affects us with reference being made mostly to adults, and in particular the educational professional. However, teachers may wish to teach stress management techniques to students. Think (if working alone) or discuss (if working with colleagues) how you might do this; how you might adjust, for example, the presentation of models in this chapter. Few younger children will be able to understand or appreciate the ‘fight/flight’ response as an explanation as to what happens in the body when emotionally charged; what concepts or metaphors could you use as substitute explanatory devices? How could you simplify, or substitute, Hinton and Burton’s (1992, 1997) model? How might you teach the REBT and PMR techniques referred towards the end of this chapter? If you could achieve these things, and if you have contact at all with young people in a pastoral role, then you could perhaps teach stress management to young people, say, before exam periods – it could be very welcome!

Viktor Frankl's Story of Surviving the Illogical Extremes (Austria)

In the final case study of this text, I hope that the reader will excuse me in drawing not from the field of education, but rather from a true life story that I believe all human beings can find inspiration in. Viktor Emil Frankl (1905–1997) was a Viennese psychiatrist who founded a school of psychotherapy known as *logotherapy*, which is influential in its own right and as a component of many counselling and psychotherapy programmes in which students are trained eclectically. However, it is the story of how some of these logotherapeutic principles were formulated which made Frankl such a compelling author and personality. In his best-selling *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), Frankl provides an overview of his psychotherapeutic approach ('logotherapy in a nutshell') after recounting his experiences in a concentration camp (he spent a total of three years in the Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Türkheim camps). In his preface to the book, the great personality researcher Gordon W. Allport explains that Frankl 'found himself stripped to his naked existence . . . excepting his sister, his entire family perished in these camps . . . every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold and brutality, hourly expecting extermination . . . a psychiatrist who has faced such extremity is a psychiatrist worth listening to' (p. 9–10). I fully agree.

The book contains many interesting professional insights (notably, on the psychological 'career' of the prisoner), as Frankl concerned himself with the question 'How is it possible for life to retain its meaning under such circumstances?'. Frankl provides numerous examples of how giving up hope underlay many deaths in the camp, and the necessity of showing the despairing men some future goal in order to restore their inner strength; quoting Nietzsche, 'He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how' as a 'guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic efforts regarding prisoners' (p. 97). This reaches its zenith in the book as Frankl recounts the speech he gave, reluctantly, to his comrades in his block in the middle of a blackout during a period of starvation enforced by the camp authorities. Although Frankl estimated his own chances at this time as being about 'one in twenty' (given that there was no typhus in the camp at the time), he told his comrades that he 'had no intention of losing hope and giving up. For no man knew what the future would bring, much less the next hour . . . human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning' (pp. 103–104). He told them of a comrade who, 'on his arrival in camp had tried to make a pact with Heaven that his suffering and death should save the human being he loved from a painful end. For this man, suffering and death were meaningful; his was a sacrifice of the deepest significance' (p. 105).

Frankl's focus on finding a meaning in life continued into his professional life as a psychiatrist after his liberation from Auschwitz, which he described as having been down to chance. The challenge of his own times, he argued, was treating the so-called the *noögenic neurosis* – the individual's experience of the existential vacuum that may appear when he or she is confronted with his or her life's meaninglessness. Frankl, like many existentially orientated practitioners, stressed the capacities that human beings have to *choose*, even in the most stressful and hopeless of circumstances – '*things* determine each other, but *man* is self-determining. In the concentration camps, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints . . . Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's prayer or the *Shema Yisrael* on his lips' (1959, p. 157).

Implications for Educators

When we reflect upon the material of this chapter, we have examined a number of models of understanding stress – conceptually, as is the case with anger, through language (Lakoff); physiologically (the 'fight/flight' response, and Selye's approach); in terms of an appraisal of demands against resources (Lazarus; Hinton and Burton). We have also seen some constructive ways of dealing psychologically (REBT) and physically (PMR) with stress, and reflected upon stress and burnout and how they may be combated in education through improved attention to organisation/environmental factors and communication (Ahonen-Eerikäinen). In these latter sections, we have faced a reality that stress is endemic in the profession of education and yet, through their understanding of this process, teachers are in an excellent position both to manage their own stress and potentially to teach students to manage theirs. Taking all of this into account, dealing with stress in ourselves and others, therefore, may be a consistent challenge, but it need not – if the issues are thought through and acted upon properly – be an overwhelming one.

Please think about, write short notes on, but above all, take the opportunity to discuss with colleagues the following pair of questions:

Using whichever of the models that have been mentioned in this chapter that you wish (the Holmes and Rahe SRRS is always tempting), work out the factors that cause you to experience stress in your working and personal life. Are these things likely to persist? Are there phases of one's career and life that are more stressful than others? Does teaching get easier when we achieve a position that offers us financial and job security? Or acceptable levels of challenge and support? Or when we learn that 'good teaching doesn't necessarily bring good results'?

Think back to the point that was made earlier around the perception of those outside the teaching profession about the work of those within it. Would you agree with the complaints that I have heard from my students regarding teaching being an 'easy' job? What are the stressors that those outside the profession are NOT aware of? Is it important that educators are supported in their work by societies at large? If so, why? Would it be a desirable thing to educate the general public about the realities of education? If so, how might this be accomplished?

Hartney, E. (2008) *Stress Management for Teachers*. London: Continuum. Practical information and strategies, firmly focused on the school context.

Vanslyke-Briggs, K. (2010) *The Nurturing Teacher: Managing the Stress of Caring.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education. A journey through the causes of teacher stress, to the development of a stress management plan.