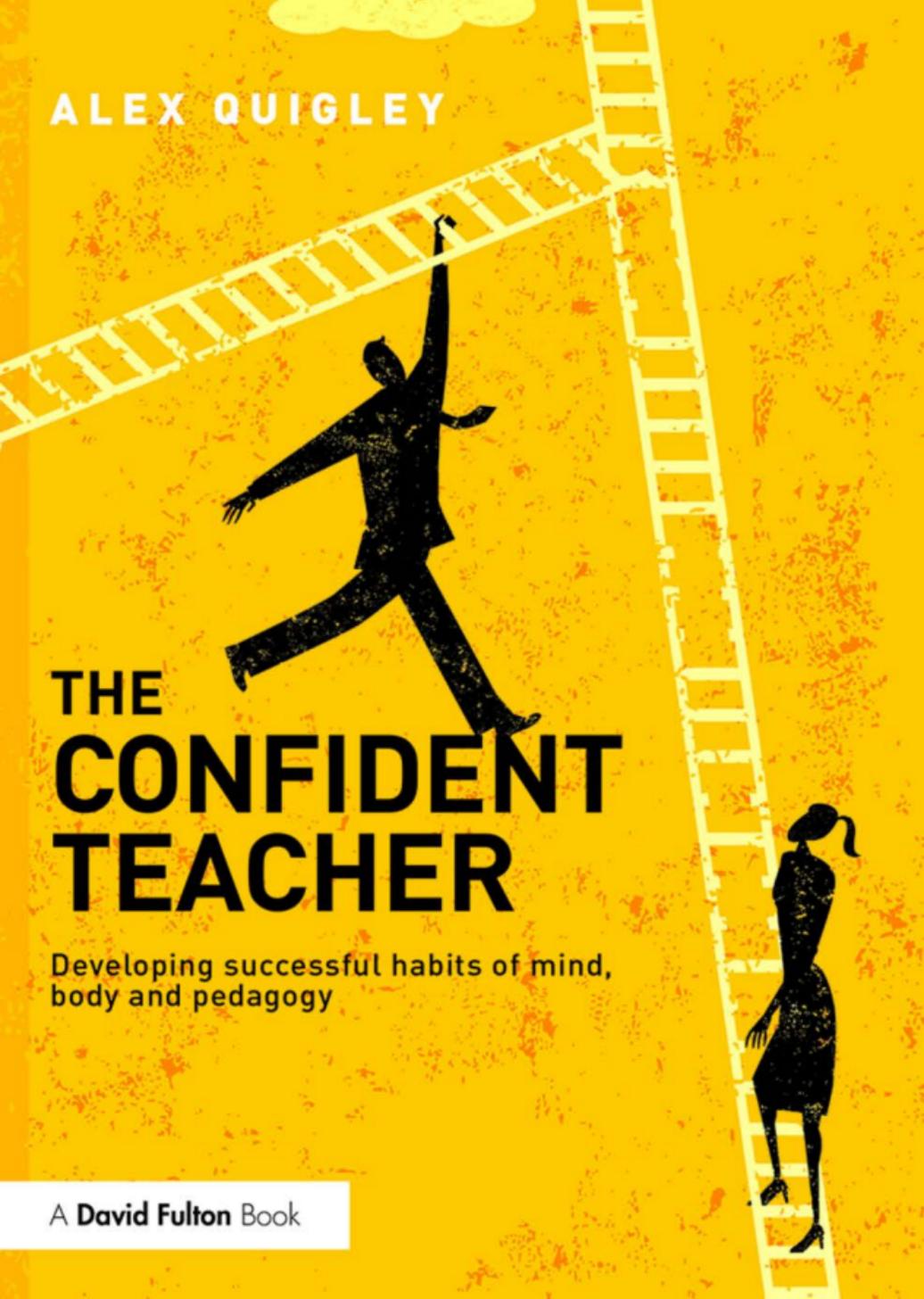


ALEX QUIGLEY



THE CONFIDENT TEACHER

Developing successful habits of mind,
body and pedagogy

A David Fulton Book

7

Combatting stress



Few teachers have escaped the chastening experience of a lesson gone awry – that lesson when your students inexplicably descend into a subtle madness. Every attempt at focus and control feels like a fool’s errand, with your best-laid plans left in tatters by your hormone-fuelled students.

For a short time, the pen-smearing whiteboard dissolves away to present something like a cloud-filled, dry savannah. The hunt is on. The pack circles; the teacher-hunter betrays their lack of sureness.

We are exposed. Our façade of control teeters dangerously. The breath quickens. Blood pounds against the walls of our strained blood vessels. Even momentarily,

our response becomes primal. Our bodies have been primed for this very scenario: fight or flight.

It is moments like these that define our professional confidence. These are moments of high stress. How do we conquer them? How do we best prepare for them happening? How do we respond to failure when it occurs? How do we best read and manage our emotions?

How do we stay resilient in these trying circumstances? Answering this question will go a long way to developing our confidence.

A stressful vocation

First, it is important to define what I mean by stress in this chapter. There is a significant difference between the chronic stress that requires clinical help and the daily stresses that beset our busy lives as teachers.

Where the boundary between manageable and chronic stress resides is a difficult question to answer. Too many small, seemingly manageable stresses and we can suffer from hypertension. Get stressed too often and our blood flow damages our blood vessels, kills neurons in our brain and damages our judgement. Crucially, our daily stresses can be better managed with effective strategies we can deploy and with well-timed support.

Our brains were designed to deal with stress, indeed to use stress, but only in short bursts. When you have no sense of control over your job as a teacher, with the pressures and expectations of doing a good job for your students, your family and yourself, the constant negative stress can be debilitating. Like low-level chatter in a classroom, it can rise to a persistent clamour.

Stress, like low self-confidence, has been pathologised, with a freight-train industry of drugs, expertise and coping strategies to attend it. It is seemingly the scourge of the

Combatting stress

modern workplace: in a UK government study, between October 2011 and January 2013, 35 per cent of sickness notes accounting for work absence were given for ‘mild to moderate mental health disorders’.¹

It isn’t just weak, failing, or lazy teachers who suffer from negative stress, as is sometimes the ill-considered caricature. High-performing teachers are pushed to the edge of their limits too. The latest government-commissioned survey in the United Kingdom has teachers working in excess of fifty hours a week.² These are the very conditions where negative stress can thrive and spread like a virus.

Stress damages your brain, hampering your *executive function* – effectively your ability to manage your decisions and your self-control – so crucial to dealing with a mass of potentially truculent teenagers. It can also damage our memory. Stress heightens our emotional memory and therefore our failures that trigger our stresses loom larger in our mind. It is a vicious psychological circle and all too familiar for the large number of teachers who leave the profession early.

We too easily think in black-and-white terms when stressed. If a lesson is imperfect, we jump on those small mistakes. Our tendency to fixate on failure can make us foresee a catastrophe in each and every event, seeking out the worst-case scenario in every situation to our detriment. This damaging response can prove emotionally contagious in a school department or faculty.

It is hard to foster self-confidence when our thinking is so clouded by such debilitating stress. We can miss the many small wins and it can lead to a spiral toward burnout³ for some. The problem is real, but the solutions are often obscured for busy teachers.

Recognising the signs of stress

For too many teachers, negative stress is commonplace in our working lives – so much so that it becomes invisible to us. The common signs of stress will be familiar to teachers everywhere. Some of the signs of negative stress include:

- Problems related to lack of sleep
- Excessive tiredness throughout the day
- Problems related to appetite: from excessive ‘comfort eating’ to under-eating
- Prone to being emotionally erratic
- Prone to indecision and overreaction
- Lacking in motivation and self-confidence
- An inability to concentrate and memory issues
- Aches and pains, headaches, diarrhoea or constipation, loss of libido, chest pain and rapid heartbeat

We have all faced these stress factors at one time or another, but when they are experienced cumulatively they can lead to professional burnout. We need to recognise our negative stresses, monitoring our stress levels, and taking action when required.

There are two helpful acronyms that can help us better recognise our negative stress levels and those of our colleagues. The first is **HALT**, which provides a useful reminder for a sequence of checks:

- H** – Check you are not too Hungry
- A** – Check you are not too Angry
- L** – Check you are not too Lonely
- T** – Check you are not too Tired

The second useful acronym is **IMSAFE**, which is a quick catalogue of issues related to stress:

Combatting stress

I – Illness
M – Medication
S – Stress
A – Alcohol
F – Fatigue
E – Emotion

Each of the issues above can prove subtle indicators of everyday stress, to warning signs of something more serious. We are all prone to running the gamut of emotions, but being more clearly erratic emotionally can be a signal for excessive stress. Similarly, becoming reliant on alcohol to manage the working day is something very different to having a glass of wine as an accompaniment to an evening meal.

One way to track our personal stresses is to keep a diary over the course of a fortnight or so, making a note of aspects like where and when we were stressed, alongside how we felt, before rating the degree of stress on a simple scale. It works just like the time audit suggested in Chapter 5. It is about becoming mindful of our emotional and physical reactions on typical working days. By tracking our stress levels and being more mindful of our emotional well-being, we can begin to pin down what triggers our stresses and how we respond under pressure.

We can balance a focus on our ‘daily hassles’ with an equivalent focus on our ‘daily uplifts’.⁴ Yes – having to input data for multiple classes can prove maddening, but it can be quickly alleviated by a laugh-laden chat with a friend. Consider stress here like a set of scales. Our stresses can build up, but we can keep them in balance by finding ways to lift our mood. This will take some planning, but the effort should prove worthwhile.

There is no quick fix and we will all respond differently to the circumstances of negative work stress. For many

teachers, self-help strategies won't be nearly enough and there will be occasions when our negative stress levels are such that we require medical support and you will need to contact your doctor. For some, leaving the profession, what I would consider a last resort, is the only answer and is to be respected and not demeaned.

Self-help can go so far, but our job as a teacher, thankfully, is founded on our relationships with our colleagues and our students, so being vigilant of negative stress in those around us becomes a crucial responsibility for us all. There is no more important task we can undertake than take care of our colleagues, and students, looking out for them and helping them recognise when they are negatively stressed and supporting them to better deal with their difficulties.

Schools leaders play a central role in helping teachers manage their negative stress. Leaders can apply simple principles for every action they undertake and each decision they implement. They can ask the questions: if we are to implement this change, what will we drop? If we are to add this task for teachers, what task will we take away? What support factors need to be in place for our teachers to flourish?

School leaders must make a conscious effort to ensure teachers feel valued and that they have an authentic voice in the decision-making process. A great deal of negative stress can emerge from teachers feeling like they are not trusted – or that there is too little confidence in them. In these circumstances, it is easy to feel helpless and to ascribe failures to our rubbish school, rather than something we can change.

In short, the point here is obvious: if school leaders were to undertake a concerted effort to improve the well-being of teachers, then the benefits can prove significant for teachers and schools. We need a culture in which negative stress is talked about and not stigmatised. Crucially, we

Combatting stress

need to understand stress and better interpret its purpose and usefulness.

Good stress

The picture of teacher stress I have painted is a bleak one so far, but some balance is required.

Mention the word 'stress' in a crowded school staffroom and the word is likely to spark a litany of complaints. The boss, fellow teachers, an uproarious student – everyone is fair game when the stressed teacher unloads their canon. Perhaps we are part of the problem. Indeed, our very perception of stress can prove, well...plain stressful!

Research has found that if we perceive that the stress we are feeling will negatively impact our health, then it can increase the risk of premature death by 43 per cent.⁵ Put simply, if you think stress can be a positive, then you can actually reduce your chances of a stress-related death!

How much control we perceive we have over our all too human daily stresses really does matter a great deal.

One of Bandura's essential strategies for developing authentic confidence was how we better interpret our physical responses. This proves crucially important here. If we view the physical signs of stress more positively, then our body can believe us and respond in a healthier fashion. If we consider our heart pounding before we speak to a crowded exam hall, we tell ourselves that is our body working to get essential blood to our heart; if we are breathing fast, we tell ourselves that we are sending essential oxygen to our brain to think more clearly. We need to learn to see these stress indicators as positive and useful.

The endocrinologist Hans Selye even coined a word for it: *eustress* (the prefix 'eu' from the Greek meaning 'good'). It is very different from the types of chronic stress that can

Combatting stress

negatively affect our sleep, mood and our willpower at work. The right degree of stress makes us better at our job as a teacher. The etymology of the verb ‘stress’ – ‘to emphasise’ – is instructive.

We need this physical and emotional *emphasis* to help us prioritise what we do. Are you someone who works to deadlines? In which case, you are actively creating low-level *eustress* to work effectively. The night before a staff presentation are you struggling to sleep? Our brain is readying itself for what is a typically challenging experience in many respects. The sweaty palms and pounding heart are followed by a surge of excitement when you have conquered your fears.

As physical education teachers and sports coaches know well, a moderate amount of stress is required for peak performance. It is known as the ‘Inverted U’ of performance:

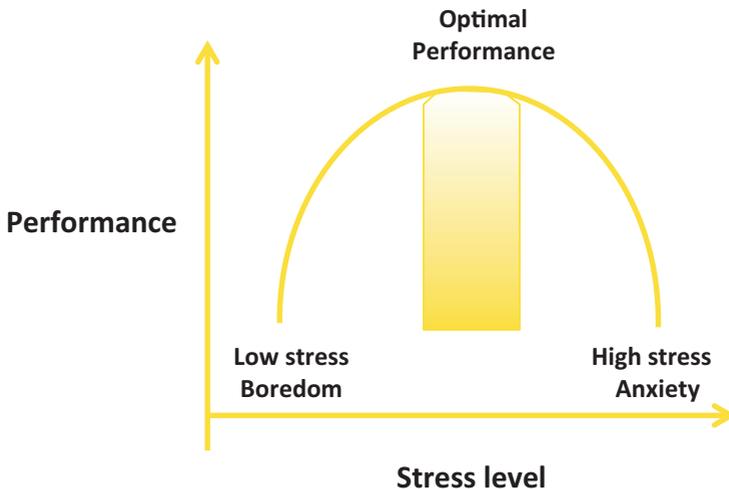


Figure 7.1

Combatting stress

If we rethink the usefulness of stress as something more productive, and we couple that with good habits and support from our colleagues, then we will go a long way to mitigating our school-related daily stresses.

One other good attribute of stress is that it actually makes us more social. Oxytocin, a hormone released when we are stressed, primes us to relate better to others, boosting our capacity for empathy. In short, it gives us a shot of social confidence. Oxytocin is a stress response just like adrenaline, but it is our body actually telling us to speak with others about our stress. We know that emotions are contagious – but they can be for good or ill.

Negative stress can circulate the room and the school, but then so can optimism and hope. It takes collective effort and mutual support amongst our teaching colleagues, but that effort pays off in the most important of ways: our collective confidence can flourish.

This highlights that being supported by our colleagues, and supporting others, is absolutely crucial to our well-being, which in turn can increase or strangle our professional confidence. We can boost our resilience in the face of stress by having significant friendships, trusting our colleagues to share our problems and to give us support and guidance. Managing negative stress is about resilience and courage, but it is also about connecting with others and good team work. This is also why being, or becoming, a confident teacher can typically prove a collective experience.

Physical solutions to combatting stress

We know that how we perceive stress is important in helping us better combat its damaging effects. We also know about the power of productivity and organisation in

heading off damaging levels of negative stress. So what else can we do when mired in a sea of troubles?

Here is my selection of just some of the simple ways we can seize control of our negative stresses, with an emphasis on our living, breathing and no doubt term-tired physical selves. They likely prove a reminder of common sense notions, but we can all do with a reminder every once in a while:

Straighten up

After a long day, our pulse rate and adrenaline has surged and settled over and over, and we are spent. The sheer weight of the day can fall upon our shoulders and we slump with tiredness. It is the same in every staffroom the world over.

The problem? Our natural response to the tiredness and stress of the school day: a hunched posture, or slumping in our chair, can worsen our mood and compound our stresses. The simple act of sitting upright in our chair can raise our mood in the face of stress.⁶ Just being conscious of sitting up straight can make a small difference.

Eat, drink and be merry

Remember the Israeli judges and their mental energy being sapped before lunch and at the end of the day? A tired and hungry teacher simply cannot exercise all of their skills effectively either. And yet, teachers the world over are working through their lunchtimes, hunched over a computer, punching in data, finishing lesson plans and thereby damaging their performance in the afternoon, before no doubt impacting upon their evening too.

When we are tired and negatively stressed, we worsen the situation by being attracted to the calorific and

Combatting stress

high-sugar snacks that give us a quick boost but ultimately see us crash all too speedily.

Take breakfast. You haul yourself out of bed and pour yourself a strong coffee, perhaps aided and abetted by some sugar-fuelled cereal. You reach work, but your early surge has already dimmed. That caffeine is coursing through your bloodstream triggering the release of the stress hormone: cortisol. This state of artificial stress and readiness can prove exhausting. You have no reserves left for teaching your classes.

I admit my hypocrisy here. I am an inveterate coffee drinker. I love the stuff. I can't shake the habit, but I am getting better at managing it. I have eliminated sugar from my coffee and cut down on the sugary snacks. I now eat fruit during the day for a natural glucose boost. It has been a steady and small change in my diet, but such marginal gains matter.

A check on the Web will see you find a cornucopia of advice about a balanced nutritional diet. Simple habits, like drinking more water, or substituting the chocolate and cakes for fruit, are within our reach. They will have the attendant benefit of feeding us with the fuel that can help us strive for greater competence and confidence.

Sleep

It is Sunday night (I bet you know where I am going with this) and your lesson planning isn't quite finished, but you have done enough. You have ticked a few other jobs off your to-do list and you aim for a relatively early night. After an hour of lying in bed, turning endlessly, desperate to claim some sleep, your negative stress level rises like heat. You stop looking at the clock and you know that the rest of your week will not catch up and claim back these lost hours.

It is the fear and loathing known by teachers the world over. Even if you enjoy teaching and you find working with your colleagues and students a profound pleasure, you can still experience this unique feeling of anxiety that clings to Sunday nights and to the ends of our school holidays.

Again, we need to recognise what our body is doing and why. If we are to live until ninety years of age, then we will spend an estimated thirty-two of those years asleep. Clearly, sleeping is no indulgence. It is essential for replenishing our energies, charging our creativity and rearing ourselves for our classes and our colleagues.

Too easily, our necessary seven to nine hours of quality sleep gets whittled down to short and broken attempts. The vital replenishment for our body and brain provided by a restful sleep is integral for you to fend off school stresses. We need an average of eight hours – some of us need a little more, some a little less (indeed, teenagers need a whopping nine hours sleep a night to function effectively at school). No amount of willpower can make up for a lack of sleep when we consistently lose out on it.

So what can you do to battle that Sunday night negative stress and to get the sleep you need? Try these simple strategies:

- Aim for regular sleeping hours, with nightly cues and calming rituals, like a good book before bed etc. If work thoughts invade your attempts to sleep, then make a ritual of completing a list for the next day to soothe your anxieties and to let go.
- Keep your bedroom a technology free zone. Emails receive a definitive no.
- Avoid caffeine four to six hours before sleep.
- Avoid alcohol and high sugar snacks near sleep.
- Cut out napping after six pm.

Combatting stress

- Don't toss and turn endlessly. If you are still awake after a twenty-minute span, then get out of bed, undertake a relaxing activity, like reading, then try sleeping again soon after.

Sleep is like depositing money in a bank. The interest on your account builds as you sleep in a good regular pattern, but the converse is sadly true. Given a few nights of poor sleep, you become deeply indebted and your brain can struggle to replenish its precious reserves. Getting into a good sleep pattern, with little rituals to convince your busy brain that sleep is afoot, is crucial.

The comfort of crowds and colleagues

'A problem shared is a problem halved' is the apple-pie-sweet aphorism. Alas, the opposite is also true. I know many a teacher whose sanctuary is the classroom and whose stresses are to be found squarely at the door of their colleagues. Some teaching colleagues, like every profession, can prove a drain on our emotional resources. Still, having a network of colleagues supporting you will help reduce your negative stress in most cases.

When our colleagues mirror our emotions, our stress levels can actually decrease. Let's put that into context. Preparing to talk in front of the entire school staff when you are a quivering wreck is a fear that plagues many teachers' minds. If you ready yourself accompanied by a seasoned teacher who is wholly assured, then their attempts to becalm you may flounder. Instead, if a colleague were to mirror your fears, by way of similarity, then they provide a helpful buffer for that shot of stress firing your way.⁷

Similarity breeds contentment, and helping others is a great way to mitigate your own negative stresses. Having friends and colleagues at school who share our concerns

and fears can help stave off some of our more debilitating worries, thereby providing us with the conditions to focus on taking risks and developing our professional practice.

The solutions we seek are most often in our social circle. Love and friendship can help conquer our negative stress. You will have heard of ‘fight or flight’, but ‘tend and befriend’ is an equally common response to stress. Everyone knows how a simple hug can make our stresses flood away. If you don’t, or you haven’t experienced this phenomenon, then you are probably in dire need of a good hug.

You now have the scientific basis to hug your fellow teachers. Use it wisely.

Write and reflect

For over three years I have written a blog about teaching and education. Billowed and buffeted by the day job, I wanted a place to record my ideas, unleash my corked rants and think about how I could get a little better and more confident.

The struggle for time, repeated in this book as the lived experience of most teachers, would appear to crush the argument for writing to enhance your confidence. Surely we don’t have time or energy for pursuits like writing? Although perceived by most as an extra ‘job’, it actually made me feel more effective and more efficient. Over time, by forcing myself to reflect and giving me an audience to connect with about my daily practice, I became more confident in what I do.

It is counter-intuitive – surely writing after a long day at school was *more* work – but it didn’t *feel* like it. That made all the difference. It was, unknowingly at first, a way to reflect and better manage my daily stresses.

This feeling was supported by a Harvard Business School research paper on ‘how the 15-minute activity of

Combatting stress

writing and reflecting at the end of the working day may make you more successful'.⁸ Paradoxically, the act of regular blogging felt like a time-saver. In another quite startling study, the act of writing about a recent trauma actually saw the trauma wound heal faster.⁹ Clearly, the psychological impact of writing and reflection can prove a potent boost for us all.

Get a life

Much has been said about the importance of getting a work/life balance; however, I think we need to rethink this divide. Instead of perceiving the tension between our work and our home life, we should instead recognise that teaching is an integral part of our lives (though we should carefully manage its presence in our home).

Of course, our schoolwork should not consume our home lives. Consider our sense of balance if we committed the time and effort to organising our time with our family and friends like we did to completing our essential projects at work. Perhaps we need to take having fun more seriously.

Too many teachers, who are also parents, in aiming to better the lives of their student brethren, forget to tend to their own children. The guilt and anxiety that can build isn't healthy for anyone. It is about the judicious balance of two competing urges and the recognition that you cannot neatly complete every facet of your professional life, but you can better manage it and yourself.

The power of control

We know that our 'locus of control' – the extent to which we believe we can control the events around us – is essential for our sense of self-confidence. If we do not believe that we make a difference to our students' lives, even if there

are social factors that make the likelihood of success a challenge, then we may struggle to maintain our best efforts when experiencing negative stress.

Take a simple test.

- *Do you believe you can control student behaviour in your classroom?*
- *Do you believe you can change what the head teacher thinks of you?*
- *Do you believe you can control the chaotic home life of one of your students?*

We must know that we cannot control everything. That seemingly obvious fact can sometimes liberate us of the subtly corrosive guilt that can attend our thinking. We can too often think in absolutes. Notions of absolutes like ‘never’ and ‘always’ are unhelpful. Sometimes we will succeed in our task; sometimes we will fail. Both may stem from our very best efforts.

We can better control ourselves, our internal ‘locus of control’, which will go some way to helping us manage our response to the external factors that we inevitably have less control over.

What we must be is flexible and agile in the face of our daily stresses – both good and bad.

We will have days when our best efforts flounder and our best-laid plans will go wrong. And yet we needn’t respond with catastrophic thinking. We can still regain control of the behaviour of our students. With good teaching, we can change the assumptions of our head teacher. With an unmitigated regard for our students, we can bring some degree of calm to the chaos of their lives, at least while they are with us.

We needn’t pursue optimism to the point of naiveté, or refuse to countenance the truth of a bad situation, but we

Combatting stress

can take care to be conscious of our own thinking. We know that seeing everything positively can make us little more than some Pollyanna character and can inhibit our pursuit of genuine self-improvement, but being hopeful is natural fuel for a teacher.

A bad lesson can prove, well, just a bad lesson. In the face of daily but ultimately temporary failures, we can still retain our sense of control and perspective, holding onto our long-term goals and responsibilities that drive us forward. In the clutch of circumstance, for good or ill, we can still be confident that we can come back tomorrow and be better. Just as our confidence can ebb, with effort and commitment, we can make it flow once more.

In ending this chapter, it is important to note that you should not feel under pressure to undertake a raft of the ideas from this chapter, or indeed this book, all at once. That would prove counterproductive. Instead, we should seek to do one small change well, making it a habit and building from there. These small changes can release some negative stress and accumulate into something powerful that supports your daily work as a teacher.

IN SHORT...

- Stress is a natural bedfellow for teachers. Better recognising the signs of negative stress, in both ourselves and in others, is of crucial importance. Though too often we cannot control our working hours, or the whims of education policymakers, we can better control ourselves and be mindful of our emotions and our stress levels.
- We need to recognise the signs of negative stress and **HALT**.

- We should recognise that stress can be a positive force and work upon thinking about how it can enhance our performance.
- Seemingly unimportant actions, like straightening our posture, or going for a short walk, can bolster our resistance to the storms of negative stress that can occur in the classroom and the staffroom.
- By undertaking these actions, and by taking care of ourselves and others, we can retain that all-important sense of control over our working lives.

Notes

- 1 UK Government, Department for Work and Pensions (2013), 'An evaluation of the statement of fitness for work (fit note): Quantitative survey of fit notes'. [Online]. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/207526/841summ.pdf (Accessed: 27 October 2014).
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Combatting stress

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