Teaching Is Fundamental:

Ideas for Friends and Spouses Supporting Teachers' Early Career Challenges



American Psychological Association
Education Directorate

Teaching is fundamental to our future as a nation. Along with the many rewards that teachers experience every year, it is normal for new teachers to experience high levels of stress during their first year or two in the classroom. Having a support system in place outside of the classroom can help to lessen the strain.

The information in this brochure can help you be an important source of encouragement during a new teacher's early career.

Teachers face new challenges every day and these challenges can be stressful.

- Managing a classroom
- Planning and teaching lessons for the first time, every day, during the first year
- Working with all the individual issues that each child brings to the classroom
- Concern about evaluation by the school administration
- Fitting in with new colleagues
- Working with parents, some of whom may have had negative experiences with schools and teachers

Acknowledging and understanding such stressors lets you and other friends and family members help the new teacher cope successfully. The goal is not to eliminate stress completely—that cannot be done—but to provide a support system to help keep stress from becoming too intense and interfering with the new teacher's life.

The good news is that as the new teacher begins to feel more comfortable with the curriculum and with her or his colleagues, stress will lessen and the rewards of teaching can come to the forefront.

Signs of Stress

People show moderate levels of stress in a variety of ways.

Some signs of stress can include:

- Crankiness or irritability
- Excessive fatigue
- Sadness and crying
- Changes in eating habits
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Increases in smoking, drinking, or other drug use

Other signs can be seen in interactions with others:

- Withdrawal from friends, family, and colleagues
- Angry interactions with others
- Touchiness and heightened sensitivity

Rather than responding to irritability by being irritable or to withdrawal by withdrawing, see these signs of stress as showing an increased need on the part of the new teacher for support and understanding.

Stress can disrupt relationships just when personal support is needed most by a new teacher. Continue to be encouraging even in the face of these stress reactions. Your support will have long-term benefits for your friend or spouse.



What to Do: The Basics

Listening to the new teacher share the ups and downs of the day or week is one of the most important ways you can help.

Listen to his or her experiences at school.

- Respond with empathy or sympathy to troubling experiences.
- Respond with enthusiasm to good news and small victories.

Initiate a conversation.

Rather than waiting for the new teacher to initiate a conversation, ask about his or her experiences. If the response is, "I don't want to talk about it right now," check, gently, to be sure that she just wants to forget about work related concerns for a while. Convey that you want to hear about her concerns when she's ready.

Resist the temptation to offer solutions right away.

In many cases, the new teacher will simply want to talk about problems and know that you understand and are concerned. Avoid saying something like, "I wonder if you could . . ." as soon as a problem comes out. You may be helpful in creating solutions to the problems, but this may be more productive later—after the new teacher has had a chance to talk and simply experience your support. We are all tempted to give advice or try to "fix" the problem even when we are not asked to do so.

Ask about victories and positive experiences.

During the first year or two, stresses and difficulties may overshadow the large and small victories that occur every day in the classroom. Asking about these victories can help reinforce the positive aspects of the new teacher's day.

Focus on something other than teaching for a while.

Structure some time for you and your friend to enjoy each other's company and do things that you enjoy. Make it a rule that school will not be discussed. Everyone needs a breather from his or her job every now and again.

Ask what you can to do be helpful.

We all have preferences for how friends and family members can be helpful and supportive. Ask what would be helpful.

Check, occasionally, to see if your support and encouragement could take other forms.

Ask how your support is working:
"I would like to help. Please tell me what would work for you."
"Are there things I could do that would be more helpful?"
"Is there anything I'm doing that's a problem?"
"If you would like us to talk about school, just let me know when it's the best time for you."

Give some space.

After being in a classroom with children or teenagers all day, new teachers may need some quiet or alone time to rest and relax. Be respectful of the fact that they may not want to discuss their day or even small talk right at the moment you ask, but may want to come back to it later.

Times When Stress Can be Particularly High for Teachers

Just before the school year starts

- Uncertainty
- Settling in with new colleagues

The first week of class

- In a whole class of unfamiliar students, some may present behavioral or learning challenges.
- Struggles can be magnified because the teacher has had no positive experiences to refer to yet. (Those positive experiences will come.)
- All the details that will eventually become routine are new and unfamiliar.

Parent-teacher conferences

- Many new teachers have had little experience or training in communicating with parents.
- Some parents will not be supportive.

During teacher evaluations

- Evaluations are stressful for all of us, and an initial evaluation may be particularly stressful.
- Some new teachers may feel the need to be "perfect" their first year, yet no one ever is.

Weeks before high-stakes testing

- Many teachers feel pressure for their students to perform well.
- Students may feel stressed or cranky.
- The entire school may be on edge.

After a crisis or a significant change at the school

Colleagues who would normally provide support may be struggling with the crisis and be unavailable.



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For More Information

www.apa.org

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Planning Ahead for Highly Stressful Times

Create a plan in advance and modify the plan as needed.

Create a plan.

Talk with the new teacher about ways that you can work together in times of high stress. There is no one correct plan that works for everyone, and strategies that help you may be different from strategies that will work best for others.

One of the best ways to make a stress-reduction plan is to ask the new teacher what strategies have worked well for her or him in the past (and alternately, what strategies did not work well). Use this information as the foundation for your plan. Some possibilities to consider are:

- Go out to eat more often or stay home more?
- Talk more or have longer periods of quiet?
- Take drives or walks?
- Get more sleep or stay out later?
- Cook more or have others cook more?
- Clean more or let clutter accumulate?

Modify the plan.

The stress new teachers experience may be different than the stress they have experienced before. So, strategies that worked well in the past may be less effective now. As you use the strategies that have worked well in the past, check in with each other to see if these strategies should be continued or changed.

The main issue is to talk about the strategies. Do not assume they are working well. Talk, talk, talk; listen, listen, listen.