

Can you really change the way you respond to stress?

If you've ever tried to explain to a non-educator why teaching is so time and energy intensive, you've probably noticed it's a hard problem to pinpoint without sounding like a whiny old grump. Here is the objective research about two factors that help determine how stressful a profession feels to its workers.

The first factor is the effort/reward ratio: if the level of effort required to effectively complete the job has a disproportionately low reward (e.g. financial compensation, promotions, and level of respect), the job is often perceived as highly stressful. The second factor is the demand/control ratio: the job is usually considered high stress if it entails excessive, never-ending, high stakes demands but the employee is allowed very little control or influence over the day-to-day operations.¹

Unfortunately for most teachers, the ratios are skewed against them: working in a school tends to be both high effort/low reward *and* high-demand/low control.

The majority of stress and frustration related to teaching stems from the high demand/low control ratio: we're being held responsible for factors that we have little jurisdiction over.² We cannot control home environments and the way students' parents raise them. We cannot control students' motivation and effort levels and the way they choose to behave. Usually we can't even control the curriculum, standards, and pacing of our lessons. There is a huge disparity between our level of influence over these issues and our level of accountability for them; we're expected to produce a pre-determined outcome regardless of the amount of support, time, and resources we have.

This makes the high effort/low reward ratio even more extreme. We continually up our efforts even though the reward doesn't increase correspondingly, because we can't imagine any alternative. We give of ourselves at the expense of our own well-being in order to strive toward goals that we did not set and are not equipped to meet. Is it any wonder that teaching has become one of the most emotionally taxing jobs in the world?

People who work in professions with high demand/low control and high effort/low reward ratios tend to burn out quickly. They are far more likely to have heart and cardiovascular problems, high cholesterol, colorectal cancer, back pain, injuries, anxiety, depression, and higher incidences of alcohol and prescription drug use.³ Some research has found that stress-related illnesses are not present when teachers are provided with adequate resources, such as emotional support, decision-making flexibility, and sufficient teaching materials.⁴ Unfortunately, these working environments are the exception...and the teachers who enjoy them are probably not reading this book.

Chances are, the research backs what you already know from personal experience: teaching is highly stressful in most schools and the type of stress it involves can have a profoundly negative effect on us.

So what can one teacher do to balance out the demand/control and effort/reward ratios without overhauling the entire education system? Is it possible to somehow:

- Lessen the demands we feel?
- Increase our perception of control?
- Decrease the mental and emotional energy we expend?
- Enhance our positive, rewarding feelings?

Absolutely. That's exactly what this book will help you do.

Who creates the stress in your life?

The first step is to understand where your feelings of stress originate. That's because how well you deal with stress depends largely on whether you view it as coming from within you or outside of you. That is, do you perceive challenging circumstances as the source of stress, or *your response* to challenging circumstances as the source?

Sometimes stress is described as a physical symptom, such as a headache, high blood pressure, or fatigue, since these signs are easily recognizable. However, when we feel stress in our bodies, it's due to unseen mental and/or emotional strain that only later manifests itself through physical ailments.

Stress starts out in our *minds*, often without us even realizing it. We think stressed out thoughts and then we feel stressed out emotions, and our bodies bear the results. Our thoughts (opinions and ideas) about an event determine whether we react calmly or feel anxious and upset. If we view the things that are happening around us in a negative way, a stress reaction will automatically be triggered.

This is the opposite of how most of us understand stress. Often people believe that stress comes from external sources, such as a

disrespectful student or an overly demanding administrator. However, your perception of those events—the way you think about them—is what determines whether you feel stressed or not.

One teacher might think, *This situation is intolerable! It should not be happening! I can't handle this and shouldn't have to deal with it!* These thoughts trigger feelings of extreme anger and anxiety, which left unchecked, can lead to physical symptoms of stress. Another teacher might think, *This is unfortunate, but it's not going to ruin my day. I won't take the situation personally and will just handle it the best I can.* These thoughts lead to a calmer emotional state and do not trigger a strong stress reaction in the body.

Choosing to define stress as something that happens *to* you steals your power to handle it effectively. When you perceive a cause-effect relationship between life events and your emotional response (e.g. student talks back, therefore I get upset), you begin to believe you cannot do anything about the situation.⁵ After all, if you feel stress because of an outside event, then the outside event must change for you to feel better. If you can't change the outside event (like a child's behavior or a school policy), you feel hopeless, frustrated, and overwhelmed.

There are many resources for teachers that address how to exert a greater positive influence over these external contributors to stress. You can learn how to foster the home-school connection, how to motivate students, and how to manage a classroom. These issues are important, obviously, or I wouldn't have written *The Cornerstone!* But these outward changes have a limited ability to reduce stress if your outlook is still distorted.

The *only* factor that you have complete control over is your mindset: the way YOU think and perceive things, and the way YOU choose to respond. If you want to create meaningful and lasting change in your job satisfaction, the best place to start is with your own thought patterns and attitude.

The power of perception: there's no such thing as a "bad" school

My first revelation about the power of one's mindset came in November 2004, right when I started on my new spiritual path and just a few weeks after both moving homes and transferring to a new school. My six years of teaching had all been in the inner city, and I wanted a break from the challenges of working in some of the nation's toughest school districts.

I found a position in a fairly affluent school co-teaching 46 elementary students in a single class. The teacher I'd be sharing my room with—I'll call her Kate—had also just transferred from an inner city school.

Kate and I clicked instantly and formed a strong partnership. We were surprised at how amazingly well-behaved and eager to learn our students were. But we immediately encountered a small group of teachers who warned us about how terrible the school was. They would complain endlessly about how the kids had no self-discipline and the parents didn't care. They proclaimed that no one could possibly teach well in such a poorly-run environment with a difficult student body and overcrowded classrooms.

We were astonished. How could they possibly think this was a bad school? Kate and I constantly reaffirmed to one another that teaching at this particular school was remarkably easy after what we'd experienced elsewhere.

The naysayers wouldn't quit, and after two weeks of listening to them drone on and on everyday at lunch, Kate shared with them what was on her mind in a calm and matter-of-fact way.

"This place is a walk in the park compared to where I'm from. You can't imagine what teachers there are facing on a daily basis. If you think this is such a horrible place to teach, request a transfer to my old school. I bet you'll think differently after that!"

The complainers were out of excuses, for once, and the conversation turned to weekend plans. Needless to say, that was the last time Kate and I ate in the faculty lounge that year.

This encounter really challenged my thinking about what it meant to enjoy being a teacher. The complainers were facing all the same difficulties my co-teacher and I were (and actually they had it easier, as they had normal class sizes and their own rooms.) Yet we perceived things so differently it was almost as if we weren't in the same school.

While they grumbled about overcrowding, Kate and I saw it as a blessing in disguise because we got the incredible experience of having a co-teacher by our side every moment of the school day. We believed that we were in a position to make a difference for the students and their families, and were determined to do so. When problems arose, we saw them as the exception, rather than the rule, and recognized how many good things we had going for us in the school. We had a completely different mindset, and therefore a completely different experience at work. The complainers left each day more discouraged and depressed than the day before; we left energized and chatting excitedly about the possibilities for the future.

Listening to other teachers bitterly fault-find the most functional school environment I'd ever experienced had made the importance of one's mindset abundantly clear. I began to realize how much a person's outlook affects their stress level every moment of every day. Your mindset is ultimately the reason why you love teaching or despise it. There is no such thing as a "good school" or "bad teaching position"; workplaces and jobs are not *inherently* good or bad. I finally understood that whether you enjoy your work or not is completely within your frame of reference.

This understanding was a major awakening for me. I was happy at that point in my career, but I still needed to learn that I had *control* over my mindset and stress level. I didn't yet realize that my internal state could be completely independent of my external environment.

Of course, Kate knew it; she was one of those "nothing gets me down, look on the bright side" people by nature. I think I made it clear in the introduction that I am not. She was content even when she was teaching in the roughest schools, and simply brought her positive attitude everywhere she went.

I marveled at how good natured she was, but didn't think I could ever possess such happy-go-lucky qualities. I worried that eventually, I'd grow weary with the daily hassles of my new school and become unhappy there, too, just like in the past.

Since we were spending 40 hours a week in the same room together, I watched Kate very carefully and began to consciously model my outlook after hers. I noticed that when something frustrating would happen and I'd want to gripe about it, Kate would brush off the incident and refocus our discussion on something productive. She refused to gossip and never wasted any energy tearing others down behind their backs. When I worried that a problem would escalate and become insurmountable, Kate would ground the conversation with a more realistic perspective and draw attention to the way I'd catastrophized things.

During the school day, I observed Kate's reactions and practiced taking her light-hearted, humorous approach to setbacks. I surrounded myself with other encouraging teachers and limited the amount of time I spent with the ones who were negative.

Then in the evenings, I'd immerse myself in all sorts of books, T.V. programs, and music that helped me learn to have a positive mindset no matter what was happening around me. I had just moved to the area so it was a perfect time to create new routines that supported my desire to grow spiritually and emotionally. I filled my free time with Bible studies, community service through my church, and countless hours hanging out in coffee shops and restaurants with new friends who were also moving their lives in a positive direction. Throughout that school year, I carefully filtered the influences in my life so that I was surrounded with people and ideas that uplifted and

encouraged me. I practiced thinking constructive thoughts and rejected thought patterns that weakened me.

And to my utter amazement, I found as the weeks passed that this new mindset was becoming a *habit*. My default emotion was no longer worry or depression; it was contentment, even when bad things happened. Now Kate and I would respond to classroom problems in the exact same way without her having to "talk me down" first. I didn't have to consciously *try* to frame things in the positive anymore or struggle to enjoy daily life—my new mindset had become like second nature.

Choosing a method for shifting your outlook

Some people are born optimists; they're naturally happy and see the best in everything and everyone around them. Other people are naturally more pessimistic. But I want you to know that it IS possible to change the way you perceive the world! If you've ever thought, "I am the way I am—I can't change the way I think or feel," I want you to be open to a new reality. You absolutely CAN change your thought habits, emotions, behaviors, and reaction to stress.

Not only is my life the evidence...it's been scientifically proven for decades, in study after study. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have found that even the most die-hard pessimistic thinkers can become optimists. It's called learned optimism, and it's simply a matter of choosing to change how you think.

You've probably heard of learned helplessness; this is the exact opposite. Martin Seligman is the world-renowned psychologist who coined both terms and has dedicated his life to the study of them. Seligman found that both pessimistic and optimistic world-views are learned (not inborn), and can therefore be *unlearned*. He teaches a set of mental frameworks you can build to protect yourself from potentially destructive influences such as a stressful workplace.⁶ His

research has shown that anyone can actively change thought patterns that reinforce the idea that stressful situations will never change, that you're the victim or cause of them, or that your job is keeping you from being happy.

Seligman proved you can learn to change the way you think—and thereby the way you experience and enjoy life—through a specific process of re-attributing thoughts. However, his techniques are just one of many effective approaches. There is an entire field known as cognitive-behavioral therapy (or CBT, pioneered in the 1960's by Aaron T. Beck) that is dedicated to helping people overcome problems by changing their thinking, emotional response, and behaviors.

Dr. Albert Ellis, who worked closely with Beck, developed a type of CBT called Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT). It's based on the powerful premise that it's not our circumstances in life that upset us, but our *beliefs* (thoughts and perceptions) about those circumstances that cause feelings of anxiety, anger, depression, and so on. REBT teaches people how to change their irrational beliefs (such as, "I must be treated fairly all the time in life and get what I want or I'll be miserable") into more rational ones ("There is no reason to believe I will always be treated fairly or get everything I want; I may be disappointed or uncomfortable, but setbacks won't be unbearable.")⁷ Today, CBT and REBT are two of the most widely-practiced therapies in the world and have been a huge influence on the suggestions in this book.

Perhaps you're not a fan of psychology and wouldn't dream of reading a self-help book. That's okay—countless people have changed their mindset through both formal and informal spiritual pursuits. My own approach was intuitive and based on scripturally-sound common sense rather than a prescribed set of steps or practices. In fact, I didn't read a single secular psychology book for the first three years I pursued change. I chose to establish a solid biblical understanding of truth first and then use that to help me

navigate through the research and recommendations from psychologists. This is evidence that the power of God is all-sufficient for transformation: neither counseling, nor a Ph.D. in neuroscience, nor a stack of self-help workbooks are requisites for change! For centuries, all over the world, people have sought to transform and renew their minds by tapping into spiritual power and using it to help them perceive life in a new way.

Clearly, there are many effective approaches to developing a new mindset for teaching and for life. The most important commonality is that you cannot avoid all sources of stress or lessen the demands of your job, but you CAN alter your mindset—and that can make all the difference.

The process of actively seeing a situation in a different light (called *reframing* by researcher Virginia Satir) allows us to let go of thoughts that are limiting and open ourselves up to new possibilities. Learning to reframe will create far-reaching positive effects on your teaching and permeate every aspect not only of your work, but of your entire life.

You can choose to think in ways that produce joy and contentment, no matter what your circumstances. You can enjoy teaching even under extremely stressful working conditions.

Making the decision to change

If you're reading this book, you're probably frustrated with the amount of demands placed on you as a teacher. You are tired of being bashed for not working miracles and you know that trying to reform a complex, powerful school system often feels like banging your head against the wall. If you're stressed out, questioning your decision to enter the profession, or wondering how you'll keep your sanity sometimes, then it's safe to assume it's time for a different approach.

I know that it's often easier to create excuses for why new solutions won't work than to test them out and really try to incorporate them into your life. I encourage you to read this book with a sense of openness. Rather than look for all the ways these suggestions couldn't work in your situation, ask yourself: *Is it possible there is an element of truth here? Is there any way I could give this a shot?* Shift your critical thoughts from, *What's wrong with the people who believe this stuff?* to *What do these people believe that could help what's wrong in me?*⁸ Let your racing thoughts subside and fully consider everything that's being presented.

Carol Dweck has written extensively about how our basic abilities are not fixed from birth, but can be improved through hard work and dedication. The belief that this development is possible is called having a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset.⁹ I encourage you to adapt a growth mindset as you read this book, believing that you can, in fact, improve your ability to handle stress and manage classroom challenges if you put forth the conscious effort to do so.

Make a determination that you will finish this book with a renewed mentality and be ready for serious change. Consciously decide before reading any further that you will no longer come home from work every night emotionally exhausted and spewing complaints. Resolve that you're going to stop getting angry about trivial matters, you're going to let go of things you can't control, and you're going to embrace whatever the future holds without worry. Make a choice to focus on what's completely within your grasp, the one thing that will impact how you experience everything else...your mindset.