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# *Preface*

*Knowledge without action is the greatest self-con of all.*

—Sharon Wegscheider Cruse, author

**Y**ou marvel at your teaching colleagues who seem to be calm and content, despite dealing with the exact same challenges and stressors that keep you tense and unhappy. You wonder how other teachers can bounce back after being berated by a belligerent parent or antagonized by an oppositional, defiant youngster in their class. You complain about the lack of administrative support in your school, yet some of your colleagues in the same school merrily charge on, without complaint. You worry about accountability demands, yet some of your colleagues seem unfazed by them.

Whether it's mastering new subject matter, addressing diverse student needs, teaching with the pressures of accountability, stretched budgets, implementing assessments, learning new technology, maintaining classroom order, managing time, or making sure that all students learn, the demands placed on teachers and administrators are increasing in number and intensity.

Compounding these demands, you are now required to wear the additional hats of a nurse, psychologist, social worker, and attorney. You are required to monitor medications, watch for diabetic and allergic reactions, manage confusing restraining orders on parents and step-parents, teach while students are texting one another, and deal with student behavioral challenges that their overwhelmed parents feel helpless to modify.

And then, when you can finally go home, besides grading papers, preparing for the next day, and taking care of your family's needs, you have to deal with the host of regional, national, world, economic, and weather crises that everyone else has to deal with. It's no wonder that teachers are at an extremely high risk for burnout and why low morale and job dissatisfaction are raging in our school systems.

Martin Haberman's (2004) review of the literature shows that stress levels among teachers and educational administrators have been rising dramatically over the years, and the average tenure for urban teachers is only 11 years. Furthermore, half of new teachers leave their jobs in five years or less (Corwin, 1973). Burnout has become a serious concern for teachers at all levels of tenure (Brock & Grady, 2000).

But not all teachers experience burnout and leave the profession. Are some people just better suited to deal with stress than others? Is there a stress-prone personality type that makes one more vulnerable to stressors? Can we learn how to increase the effectiveness of how we cope with the stressors that surround us? Can we actually learn skills that will buffer us against stressors and make us more resilient?

Obviously, the answers to these questions are critical when deciding whether you are going to complete a career in teaching or succumb to teacher burnout and leave the profession. How can you survive in this demanding and underappreciated field? This book will provide answers and show you how to develop resilience to the inevitable stressors that you will face during your teaching career.

Let's begin here with the story of Benita A., who was recognized in 2008 by *USA Today* as an All-USA teacher. Benita teaches high school juniors and

seniors, with mixed ability students in each of her classes. There is not enough time in the day for Benita to accomplish everything she wants to. She works from 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and then comes home to grade homework and several other activities. She says her greatest challenges are motivating her

### Good News!

This book is filled with practical, easy-to-learn tips (prescriptions) that teach you how to buffer yourself against stress and how to master the stressors that still manage to creep into your life. Success stories from teachers will also be provided so that you may consider adopting some of their secrets of success over the stressors involved in teaching.

unmotivated students while trying to challenge highly motivated students, who are often stressed having to deal with their parents' expectations of all A's.

Benita has found a marvelous way to work on both of these challenges simultaneously. Recognizing that her poorer performers suffer from lower self-esteem, expectations that they won't do well, and the it's-not-cool-to-make-A's syndrome, Benita does not separate her highly motivated, good students from her at-risk students.

Instead, Benita gets volunteers from her motivated group to work as student assistants, role models for the struggling students, helping them do their best. She finds that not only do the good students find this work rewarding, but also the other students realize that these "nerds" can be cool. An atmosphere of mutual respect develops.

Benita tells *all* of her students that they are capable of getting A's. Accordingly, she starts every student with an A+ at the beginning of the grading period. She let's them know that she will be there both before and

after class for anyone in need of help and for informal study groups. She encourages a *team spirit* in her class. Additionally, Benita has instituted a unique, self-evaluation point system that each student completes at the end of each day with the following questions:

- Were you on time? (1 point)
- Did you bring your materials to class? (1 point)
- How well did you listen without interfering with others during the day? (2 points)
- Did you work until the bell or was your work finished early? (1 point)

Students see their point totals each day. Their grade slips only when they *lose* a point. So the students are accountable for their behavior and performance. Benita expects that *all* of her students are capable of performing well, thus instilling a *positive*, self-fulfilling prophecy in them. Amazingly, since she instituted this system, Benita has had *no disciplinary problems* in any of her classes. Furthermore, most of her students wind up with Bs or better! This brings to mind a quote from famous author John Stuart Mill:

*A pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do never does all he can.*

Each chapter in this book will have a real-life example from a teacher, except Chapter 6, in which I will share information about myself and what I did to ward off the stressors of meeting the deadlines for finishing this book!

This book is intended to be a “rat-eared,” self-help primer that you revisit often for precise prescriptions for not only mastering the stressors in your job and life, but also reminders of how you can be proactive and greatly reduce your vulnerability to those stressors. Ideally, you will learn how to *prevent* experiencing the symptoms of *distress* and burnout. In essence, you will develop a Teflon-like *resilience* to the stressors that will inevitably cross your path.

The behavioral prescriptions contained in this guide are all based on state-of-the-art research in the fields of *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, *Stress Mastery*, *Resilience Theory*, and the *New Positive Psychology for Authentic Happiness*.

In addition to the comments of nationally recognized teachers whom I have interviewed, much of my information is based on the many teacher clients I have treated over the past 33 years in my private and consulting practices. The goals here are to rivet your attention to the nuts and bolts of mastering stress and preventing burnout with easy-to-learn, proven strategies that *really work!*

Each chapter begins with a list of learning objectives and focuses on a real-life anecdote. You’ll also find special features throughout the book, including “Good News” boxes, which direct you to practical actions you can take to lower your stress level, and “Stress Mastery Prescriptions,” which

are stress-management tools to help you take charge of your emotional well-being, in both the short and the long term. Finally, each chapter concludes with a specific action plan. Each action plan summarizes what you learned in the chapter and includes a checklist to help you integrate your new behavioral skills into your everyday repertoire. There are also several blank boxes available in each action plan so you can include additional behaviors and skills that you began as a result of reading that chapter. So keep this book close by and relax, knowing that there is an action plan available at the end of each chapter to keep you on target.

All of the Stress Mastery Prescriptions are listed together in Resource B for easy review, so you can pick and choose prescriptions as the need presents.

Although learning the exact sources of your stress and how to become more resilient to them is the basic purpose of this book, practicing your new skills is essential to success. With practice, you will succeed in developing new habits, which will help you insulate or *inoculate* yourself against the devastations of psychological burnout.

Have a highlighter and pen handy. Highlight and put asterisks next to the sections, descriptions, teacher stories, phrases, and action plans that affect your life and you will want to find again easily. Consider using a red pen to mark passages that give you hope, and write "Good News" in the margin.

Actually, there are many more than 77 proven behavioral prescriptions to help you succeed because many of them are multiple prescriptions and the text and many of the tables have additional prescriptions embedded in them. My goal is for this book to be a comfort to you, helping you to realize that there are behaviors that you can put into action immediately to overcome any issue or problem in your teaching career.

If you skip around, be sure to go back and read the sections you skipped because there are prescriptions scattered throughout each chapter, which you may want to put to use immediately. Choose new prescriptions to incorporate in your weekly routine and practice, practice, practice. Research shows that if you practice these skills consistently, you should see positive changes in about 21 days (Fishel, 2003).

Besides personal skills, the prescriptions also include suggestions to bring to your classroom and to share with your administrators. Because stress in the teaching profession is so pervasive, perhaps you can organize a teacher support group in your community so you can all share these ideas and learn what your colleagues have successfully done in their schools and lives to overcome their stress.

Although we are all victims of unfortunate, self-defeating, habitual patterns of setting ourselves up for distress and letting it get the best of us, we are certainly capable of breaking through the psychological shackles that have bound us since we were children to explore new ways of thinking and reacting that are positive and beneficial. For many of us, embracing change is risky, but those risks certainly have their rewards. You have many choices in life. Among them is choosing to change unfortunate

beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors that have kept you trapped in a cocoon of unhappiness, stress, and despair. For many of you, choosing to make changes represents risk; however, most well-thought-out risks reap lifetime rewards. Robert Frost (1993) said it best:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

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From *The Road Not Taken and Other Poems*, by Robert Frost, p. 1, Dover Publications, Stanley Applebaum, Editor, 1993. Used with permission.

Enjoy this journey to health, success, and happiness. In many ways, your life depends on it.

Following the action plan, at the end of each chapter, there will be a references list.

## REFERENCES

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