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Ways to Turn Stress Into Success

These surefire attitude adjusters will give you (and your students) a fresh start to the school year.
By *Erich Strom*

EVERY TEACHER HITS A PATCH where each day seems to bring the same struggles, sometimes with the same kids, sometimes with different ones. At these moments, you may feel like everything is about to derail. How you cope with these behavioral problems, especially at the start of the year, can set the tone for success or failure in the months ahead.

We've pulled together 10 tips from master educators that summarize new ways of thinking about frustrating situations. Choose a few that resonate with you. Then, whenever you find yourself doing the same thing and expecting different results, consider it a sign that you need to take a fresh approach!

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1 Take the Blame

When a problem gains traction, many teachers see students as the sole cause (the students, meanwhile, have likely come to the opposite conclusion). Author and guidance counselor Allen Mendler suggests putting a wrench in the blame game by taking the blame yourself. Apologize for your role. By making the problem your problem, it opens up space to ask students to help you solve it. Also, taking responsibility reduces stress. “Students will engage,” writes Mendler in his book *When Teaching Gets Tough*, “when they feel they aren’t being blamed.”

2 Revise Your Class Rules

“Rules automatically set up an adversarial relationship,” says Marvin Marshall, a longtime educator and counselor and the author of *Discipline Without Stress, Punishments, or Rewards*. They turn teachers into cops and students into criminals. To break the cycle, reformulate rules as expectations and procedures. “No talking out of turn” could be restated as “Respect others” or “Raise your hand and wait to be recognized.” Doing so, Marshall says, shifts the teacher’s mind-set to “What can I do to help the student help himself or herself?” and his or her role from enforcer back to teacher.

3 Make the Kids Do the Work

You’re running ragged and your students are sinking into lethargy. It’s time to adjust the balance. “The work of learning looks a lot like the work of teaching,” write Shellee Hendricks and Russell Reich in *Notes on Teaching*. “Hand both over to the students.” When kids ask questions, turn the questions around—and give them time to think about them. Let students come up with their own projects and discussion topics. Hendricks and Reich



invoke the example of writer Frank McCourt, who had his students write their own tests: “They asked questions they wanted answers to and then they answered them. It was grand.”

4 Appreciate Failure

“Failure is instructive,” wrote early-20th-century educational theorist John Dewey. “The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes.” Marshall agrees heartily: Teachers should “constantly remind students that mistakes are an opportunity to learn.” The struggling student “gets a math test back, and his self-talk is, ‘I’m not good at math,’” Marshall says, while his flourishing counterpart “gets the exact same test back and his self-talk is, ‘I guess I’ll have to study harder.’” Notice your responses toward students’ failures, both academic and behavioral. If you treat them as invaluable opportunities to learn, students will eventually come to do so as well.

5 When the Going Gets Tough, Do Nothing

When a student gets under your skin, do you find yourself reacting emotionally, rather than responding wisely? Marshall recommends a simple mindfulness procedure to avoid being “emotionally hijacked.” Whenever you feel that surge, just stop, as if at a red light. Let your mouth open and take deep breaths “like gasps—*aahhh*,” says Marshall. That fosters physical and mental relaxation and gives you a moment to consider your options—the yellow light. When you’ve chosen the best approach, the light turns green. It’s time to act. (For more on mindfulness, see sidebar, page 35.)

6 Raise Your Expectations

High expectations foster high achievement. A given, perhaps, but as Annette Breaux and Todd Whitaker point out



STRESS-FREE CLASSROOM

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in *Making Good Teaching Great: Everyday Strategies for Teaching With Impact*, there is plenty of research to back it up. Over time, a teacher can buy into a student’s story line that he “just can’t read” or “can’t help” his frequent emotional outbursts. “If you expect a student to misbehave, he usually will,” write the authors. Take note of your expectations for each student on a regular basis. It requires effort to keep expectations high—and to communicate those expectations with every interaction. “When [students] falter, and they will, repeat your belief in them and remind them of your expectations,” say Breaux and Whitaker.

7 Note Improvement, However Minor

It’s hard to shake a bad reputation. A kid you’ve had to chastise for chronic misbehavior may in fact be improving.

“In the heat of frustration,” Mendler writes, “it is easy to miss or minimize the fact that a student’s ‘blurting out’ may have gone from 25 times a day to 10.” Keeping a “success log” can help both student and teacher break free from their preconceptions. Reserve some time each day for students to track their successes and progress. Then, when a student is struggling, the log can serve as a reminder of his ability to improve over time.

8 Build Up Trust

“Establishing a chemistry of trust between the children and ourselves,” writes educator and activist Jonathan Kozol, “is a great deal more important than to charge into the next three chapters of the social studies text.” Mendler recommends dedicating a few minutes each day to connecting with one of your students. Start at the

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beginning of the year, and take advantage of times when the rest of the class is working on a project. “Stay away from expressing anything critical,” he writes. “It is a time to share information about yourself or ask questions to get to know the other person better.” Work with your most difficult students first, and don’t get discouraged if a student doesn’t want to open up. Just keep at it.

9 Tolerate a Little Tomfoolery

Gary Rubinstein, in his book *Reluctant Disciplinarian*, says that it can be counterproductive to address every whisper and rumble you hear. Much of the time, class can roll along just fine, even when kids are in high spirits. In that light, it’s actually the teacher’s response that brings things to a halt. The key to breaking that habit, writes Rubinstein, is awareness: “You need to give yourself an extra half second between the time something happens and the time you react so that you can decide if this is something you should choose to ignore.”

10 Put the Difficult Student in Charge

Mendler argues that the students who are the most challenging to handle are often seeking a feeling of power and control. Rather than butting heads with them, redirect their needs by empowering them. One teacher took a suspected thief aside and made him responsible for keeping her purse safe. That ended the classroom crime wave. (She did remove her valuables first, by the way). Another teacher, says Mendler, charged a chronic whiner with collecting all of the other students’ complaints and then presenting them on behalf of the entire class. Be creative, and work with kids’ impulses and energy rather than stifling them, because that’s a battle you’ll never win. □

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Mind Over Matter

Can meditation become a cure for classroom behavior problems?

While preparing a unit for first graders on Jon Muth’s *Zen Shorts*, Angela Baccala, a librarian at the Key School, in Annapolis, Maryland, asked colleagues about introducing the kids to meditation practice. “They looked at me like I was insane,” she recalls. But they told her to go ahead. One class plagued by behavioral problems responded so well, Baccala asked the head of the lower school for permission to continue letting kids practice. The response: “Whatever is helping them, keep doing it.”

That exchange reflects a growing mainstream acceptance of mindfulness meditation. Much credit for that goes to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine whose research has helped to establish meditation’s efficacy in dealing with stress, anxiety, and pain. How does it work? By cultivating the ability to stay present with stressful situations, Kabat-Zinn writes, “you can respond” rather than having to “react automatically in the same old way every time your buttons get pushed.”

At Warstler Elementary, in Canton, Ohio, the entire school starts each day with four or five minutes of mindfulness practice. Guidance counselor Joel McNenny, who has studied Kabat-Zinn’s approach, started the program last fall. He began by visiting each class to instruct students on noticing their “belly breaths.”

Students have taken to mindfulness beyond McNenny’s wildest expectations. During statewide assessments, “lots of kids put their pencils down and take breaths,” he says. “Out on the playground, when kids are arguing over rules, other kids will say, ‘Take a breath.’ Parents tell us, ‘The kids are coming home and telling us to take belly breaths.’” Plans are afoot to expand the mindfulness program to all the elementary schools in the district.

Intrigued? Here are some ways to get started at your school.

- **TRY MEDITATION 101.** A classic technique that’s easy? When kids come back from recess with racing hearts and high energy, get them to slow down by closing their eyes and noticing physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings.
- **PARTNER WITH AN ORGANIZATION.** A number of organizations, such as Mindful Schools and The Aware Teacher (a project of Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness), offer training and resources to help teachers introduce mindfulness to their students.
- **DO A PILOT PROGRAM.** To get buy-in from both school staff and parents, do as Baccala did at the Key School—start with one class in need of intervention and track the results. Then use those results to take it to the next level.

