

Promoting Longevity: Strategies for Teachers of Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Mrs. Donohue, a middle school teacher of students with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD), emphasizes that her job is extremely challenging. Her biggest issue is lack of administrative support. She reports, "I don't think my administrator understands students with EBD or the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) process." She would like her administrator to understand that when she asks for help, she needs it immediately, not in 20 minutes. She is also concerned that her students need supervision throughout the day, which results in her not having a prep or lunch hour. Mrs. Donohue copes by exercising after work, having a personal life outside of school, and remaining current in her field. Mr. Clark, a teacher for students with EBD at an alternative school, had similar experiences with administrators in the past. He says, "The current issue I face is the large number of students with significant behavior problems, especially when they exhibit challenging behavior simultaneously in the same setting." Mr. Clark copes by leaving work at school, having a personal life outside of school, and talking to colleagues about his day-to-day frustrations. Mrs. Donahue and Mr. Clark are like thousands of teachers of students with challenging behaviors across the country who want to make a positive impact on children or youth. Their positions, however, often lead to frustration, stress, or fatigue. Without healthy coping skills and a support system, teachers like Mrs. Donahue and Mr. Clark often leave the field feeling unappreciated and burned out.

Personnel shortages in the field of special education and the use of provisionally certified staff to fill special education teaching positions are widely acknowledged (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Council for Exceptional Children, 2001; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Teacher attrition is a major contributor to special education personnel shortages. Nationally, between 7% and 15% of special education teachers leave annually, depending on the definition of attrition used (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). If 10% leave each year, administrators will need to replace half of their special education staff in a 5-year period (Billingsley, 2005).

The American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE, 2000) reported higher attrition rates among teachers of students with EBD than among teachers of other disabilities. Further, finding qualified special educators to teach students with EBD is perhaps more problematic than any other disability in special education (AAEE, 2004; Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Hardman, 2004). Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy (2003) analyzed data on special education teacher shortages over a 10-year period and reported a disproportionate national shortage of teachers of students with EBD. Many factors contribute to this critical shortage, such as stress teachers experience due to students' (a) academic and social skill deficits; (b) unmet psychological needs; (c) lack of insight and self-awareness; (d) emotional and behavioral deficits; (e) lack of problem-solving skills; (f) poor coping strategies; and (g) inability to take responsibility for

their actions (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990; Shores, Gunter, Denny, & Jack, 1993; Zabel & Zabel, 2001).

Research investigating the longevity of teachers of students with EBD is not a recent area of study. In fact, the special education attrition literature has referenced teacher shortage and burnout among such teachers since the 1980s. Sources and consequences of stress and burnout reported in this literature included (a) decreased feelings of accomplishments (Embich, 2001; Pullis, 1992; Stiver, 1982; Zabel & Zabel, 1982); (b) overwhelmed feelings (Pullis, 1992; Sweeney & Townley, 1993); (c) lowered professional commitment (Nelson, Maculan, Roberts, & Ohlund, 2001); (d) impaired personal or professional relationships (Nelson et al., 2001; Pullis, 1992; Sweeney & Townley, 1993; Wrobel, 1993); (e) disrupted sleep patterns, neglected responsibilities, and disregarded personal accomplishments (Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Pullis, 1992); (f) physical complaints, such as headaches and exhaustion (Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Sweeney & Townley, 1993; Wrobel, 1993); (g) emotional exhaustion (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Zabel & Zabel, 1982); (h) increased occasions of dealing with students in impersonal ways and feeling guilty for not providing an effective education for them (Pullis, 1992; Sweeney & Townley, 1993); (i) increased use of alcohol and other substances; (j) increased absences (Maslach & Jackson, 1984; Pullis, 1992; Sweeney & Townley, 1993); (k) poor attitudes regarding students (Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993; Miller,

Table 1 CATEGORIES AND STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING STRESS AND BURNOUT

Category	Suggestions
Develop a positive and adaptive frame of mind by...	Eating right, relaxing, being active, maintaining interests outside of school, setting realistic expectations, maintaining hope, looking at the positives, reflecting on one's work, and making work as enjoyable as possible
Form positive collegial relationships by...	Using effective communication skills, connecting with positive people, getting involved in social activities, supporting others
Use effective organizational strategies by...	Chunking large projects, prioritizing tasks, evaluating existing organizational systems, delegating responsibilities, enlisting student support, using data for multiple needs
Embrace change, innovation, and new opportunities by...	Remaining current in the field, conducting research, connecting with local and state entities, setting professional goals
Collaborate with administrators by...	Keeping administrators informed, sharing positives, thanking administrators for their support, focusing on student needs
Assess one's stress and burnout level by...	Completing checklists and rating scales, noting changes in energy, passion, or interests, talking to others

Brownell, & Smith, 1995; Sweeney & Townley, 1993); (l) increased reactions to mild work pressures (Stiver, 1982); (m) increased detachment and distance from students (Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Stiver, 1982); (n) disrupted personal and professional life (Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Stiver, 1982; Zabel, Boomer, & King, 1984); (o) increased cynicism and a dehumanized view of students (Stiver, 1982; Zabel et al., 1984); (p) lowered morale and creativity; and (q) a disorganized classroom (Stiver, 1982; Zabel et al., 1984).

These findings are significant because the symptoms of stress and burnout have far-reaching effects. Teachers, however, can recognize signs of burnout and implement strategies that promote personal and professional wellness.

Promoting Longevity: Practical Strategies

This article presents practical strategies that promote longevity for teachers of students with EBD that fall into six categories: (a) developing a positive and adaptive frame of mind; (b) forming positive collegial relationships; (c) using effective organizational strategies; (d) embracing change, innovation, and

new opportunities; (e) collaborating with administrators; and (f) assessing one's stress and burnout level. Strategies in each of these categories are summarized in *Table 1*.

Most attrition studies have focused on problematic work environments and their relationship to stress, burnout, and attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Since 1992, four reviews of the literature on stress, burnout, and attrition of special education teachers have been published (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). None of these, however, provided research studies that systematically investigated interventions that alleviate the stress, burnout, and attrition of special education teachers. Clearly, research-based strategies for improving retention in special education are limited (Brownell & Smith, 1992). Most of the research on this topic is correlational, descriptive, or survey in nature (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). In a literature search conducted by the primary author of this article, only one study was found that addressed the effects of interventions on the stress, burnout, and attrition of special education teachers (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996). These researchers investigated the

impact of a staff development and peer collaboration program on the attrition rate of special education teachers. The results indicated that the attrition rate decreased as a function of these interventions. Therefore, because scientific intervention studies on teacher stress and burnout are limited, the suggestions provided here are largely based on emerging research, our classroom experiences, and our work with teachers of students with EBD.

Developing a Positive and Adaptive Frame of Mind

The manner in which teachers perceive their teaching assignment has a significant impact on job satisfaction. Consequently, attitudes toward students, the teaching assignment, and oneself influence longevity. A positive and adaptive frame of mind includes developing effective stress-coping skills, communicating hope, setting reasonable expectations, and making work as enjoyable as possible.

To develop stress-coping skills, teachers can adopt a healthy diet of whole grains as well as green, yellow, and orange vegetables that boost immune response and avoid caffeinated beverages, fried foods, and foods high in saturated fats (Holistic

Online, 2004). They may also consider a regular form of rest and relaxation, such as yoga, meditation, prayer, music, deep breathing, or massage. Regular physical activity appears to reduce depression and anxiety, improve mood, and enhance the ability to perform daily tasks (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1999). Similarly, Clement (1999) emphasized the importance of rejuvenating oneself. Teachers can do this by decompressing before going home for the evening. Ruminating over a disturbing issue the entire evening will negatively affect family relationships and one's effectiveness at school the following day. Finally, maintaining interest and activity in hobbies and interests outside of school may provide a positive outlet and generate social contacts outside of school.

Secondly, teachers can maintain hope and optimism by having faith in their abilities to teach and reach students. Specifically, teachers can (1) remember that their teacher preparation program and field experiences have prepared them well; (2) continue to use resources and new strategies that assist students; (3) believe in students' abilities to improve both academically and socially and communicate such improvement by acknowledging small successes; and (4) look at positives in situations through reframing (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2005). For example, perhaps a student stormed out of the inclusion class, but this time he did not use abusive language toward the teacher. Exercising a positive belief system helps teachers effectively cope with stress (Center & Stevenson, 2001).

Teachers can also maintain hope and optimism by (1) accepting and acknowledging positive and constructive feedback from parents, colleagues, and administrators; (2) remembering that many teachers do not have the skills or ability to effectively work with students identified as EBD; (3) learning from one's mistakes, asking for assistance

when needed, journaling to reflect upon successful and unsuccessful interventions; and (4) frequently reconnecting with the personal, professional, and philosophical reasons for becoming a teacher by reflecting upon these questions: What is my career purpose? What are my strengths, talents, gifts, and assets? What brings me joy? What is my passion? What do I love to do? (Glickman, 2002).

Next, teachers can set realistic expectations for themselves and others. For example, changing students' prosocial interactions towards peers takes time, and they are unlikely to change their behavior on your timetable. Therefore, teachers should concentrate their energy into improving conditions, while recognizing that some conditions cannot be changed or may change very slowly. Similarly, teachers can identify and acknowledge their feelings. When worried or fearful about a possible conflict, assess the reasons for those feelings and implement a plan that addresses those feelings. For example, if Frank typically disrupts math class, which makes you anxious, ask him if he would like to do the first few math problems with you before working independently.

Finally, teachers can develop a positive and adaptive frame of mind by making their position as enjoyable as possible. Some practical ways of doing this include (a) appreciating the spontaneity, sense of humor, and growth of students; (b) discussing your hobbies and interests with students and considering ways to integrate these interests, as well as those of your students, into the curriculum; and (c) adding spontaneity, fun, interest, and curiosity into the curriculum by doing one new or novel thing each week.

Forming Positive Collegial Relationships

Due to their responsibilities and workload, teachers of students with

EBD tend to isolate themselves and rarely interact with colleagues (Billingsley, et al., 1993; George et al. 1995; Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995). They tend to work all day and spend most of the day in their classroom working on required tasks or supervising students. Avoiding breaks limits opportunities to develop collegial relationships. Teaching is more enjoyable when collaborative relationships are developed with colleagues.

First, teachers can develop collegial relationships by employing effective communication skills. They can exercise effective listening skills by using minimal encouragers ("Uh-huh, I see"), paraphrases ("Let me see if I have this..."), and empathy statements ("I would be frustrated if I were you, too") (Turnbull et al., 2005). Teachers can also avoid language that angers or upsets others or alienates. For example, avoid general statements that criticize, judge, or blame, such as "The teachers around here need to use more consistent discipline." Also, teachers who value collegial relationships remember that they cannot "do it" alone. To this end, they trust their instincts, associate themselves with quality individuals or organizations, and appreciate the company of colleagues who, at the end of a long day, refresh them with hope and inspiration. For example, when having a challenging day, consider sharing frustrations with a colleague who is still "turned on," works with students with challenging behavior, and understands the frustration. Finally, teachers may wish to create or participate in support venues, such as an EBD teacher support group or a teacher-mentoring group (Conderman, 2001).

Another way to form collegial relationships is to take time to be involved in social activities. This can be accomplished by (a) participating in activities outside of school with colleagues through community, athletic, or cultural events; (b)

socializing with colleagues as much as possible (e.g., teacher's lounge, before school, or after school); (c) remaining a visible part of the school community by volunteering for activities, committees, or other school-related programs, when possible; and (d) supporting and assisting colleagues whenever possible by sharing effective strategies through formal or informal staff development opportunities, volunteering to observe and assist with students who exhibit challenging behaviors, and being a resource consultant for supporting students with challenging behavior (Friend & Cook, 2007).

Using Effective Organizational Strategies

Overload for the teacher of students with EBD can lead to stress, burnout, and attrition (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Morvant et al., 1995; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; Westling & Whitten, 1996). Excessive paperwork, large caseloads, multiple meetings, minimal instructional time, and other responsibilities, such as bus and lunchroom duties, contribute to decisions to leave the field.

Effective teachers are organized and have clear and realistic expectations of themselves (Burnette & Peters-Johnson, 2004). Teachers who reduce stress employ effective organizational skills, set priorities, manage time wisely, and are realistic of what they can accomplish in a set time period. Setting priorities and scheduling tasks are necessary skills needed in managing time and daily events.

Teachers can improve their organization skills by (a) pacing themselves by setting realistic, yet flexible goals for themselves and students by assessing the time needed to accomplish tasks; (b) separating large projects into small manageable parts. For example, if 10 annual reviews are due in April and May, complete the goals and benchmarks

for two IEPs per week; (c) establishing priorities by asking questions, such as "What are the most important goals I must achieve this week or day?" "How can I make the most of my week or day?" "What are the best actions I can take to achieve these goals?" Then, implement your plan (Glickman, 2002). Teachers can also develop and prioritize lists for upcoming tasks. Consider the costs and consequences of listed priorities. For example, it may be more important to greet students at the door in the morning than write an evaluation report that is due Friday. Teachers can improve organizational skills by keeping materials easily accessible to support transitions; maintaining paperless student files on the computer, processing each paper as it arrives, keeping the desk clear of clutter, and using color coded files (Eisenberg & Kelly, 2005); arranging materials for tomorrow's lessons before leaving for the day; delegating appropriate tasks to paraprofessionals such as supervising students, grading assignments, collecting data and monitoring student progress, facilitating peer interactions, and taping point sheets to students' desks before leaving for the day (French, 1999); utilizing student self-management strategies by teaching students to collect, record, and contribute in data-based decision making for social and academic behaviors; collecting information for multiple needs (e.g., teachers can utilize IEP goals as a metric for monitoring student progress and use point sheets as a monitoring tool); and improving classroom management skills. Audiotape yourself teaching your most challenging group and tally your positive and negative student interactions. Set a goal to offer four positive interactions for every negative interaction (Frederickson & Losada, 2005). Video tape yourself or request that someone observe your management skills and take data on the effectiveness of various approaches.

Embracing Change, Innovation, and New Opportunities

Teachers who are successful and experience longevity develop as individuals and educators by learning current trends in the field, implementing research into practice, and evaluating the effectiveness of their practices (Burnette & Peters-Johnson, 2004). To facilitate professional growth, teachers can implement new methods in the classroom and assess their effectiveness, attend conferences (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) or national, regional, or state conferences on EBD), and implement ideas and strategies learned, such as student-led conferences (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000) or service learning (McCarty & Hazlelorn, 2001). They can also conduct action research in their classroom or school, read professional journals (e.g., *Beyond Behavior*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *Intervention in School and Clinic*), and learn new strategies or procedures from colleagues in and out of the school district. Teachers can also embrace change and innovation by connecting with local and state entities. Some teachers enjoy being a student-teaching cooperating teacher, while others remain active in state-level activities regarding teacher preparation. Finally, teachers can maintain their motivation by volunteering as a mentor, sharing with staff what was learned at conferences or through the professional literature, presenting at conferences, making connections with colleagues in other districts, and developing a support system with colleagues in other districts.

Collaborating with Administrators

One of the most frequently cited factors of stress, burnout, and attrition of teachers of students with EBD is lack of administrative support (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; George et al., 1995; Gersten et al., 2001; Nelson, et al., 2001). A strong, healthy, and

Table 2 CHECKLIST OF STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING STRESS AND BURNOUT

#	Strategy	Yes	No	If No, Plan Of Action
	<u>Developing A Positive Frame Of Mind</u> Do I...			
1.	Set reasonable expectations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
2.	Leave work at work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
3.	Maintain a balance between my professional and personal life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
4.	Look for the positives in a situation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
5.	Focus energies on what I can change or have control over?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
	<u>Forming Positive Collegial Relationships</u> Do I...			
6.	Practice effective listening skills (e.g., reflective listening)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
7.	Participate in social activities outside of work with colleagues?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
8.	Provide assistance to colleagues when they need assistance?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
	<u>Organizational Strategies</u> Do I...			
9.	Prioritize tasks in order of importance (e.g., charting, IEPs)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
10.	Separate large projects into small steps (e.g., annual reviews)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
11.	Use self-management strategies with students?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
12.	Delegate appropriate tasks to your paraprofessional?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
	<u>Embracing Change, Innovation, and New Opportunities</u> Have I...			
13.	Volunteered as a mentor in my building?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
14.	Made connections with special education colleagues in other districts?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
15.	Conducted action-based research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
	<u>Collaborating with Administrators</u> Do I...			
16.	Keep my administrator informed about what is going on in my classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
17.	Focus more on solutions rather than challenges?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
18.	Communicate to colleagues and administrators that "It is all about the kids"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
	<u>Assessing Level of Stress</u> Have I...			
19.	Assessed whether or not I have symptoms of stress and burnout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
20.	Developed positive coping strategies to alleviate stress and burnout?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
21.	Developed a plan to revitalize myself?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

open relationship with your principal or special education administrator can reduce stress. Some ideas for collaborating with administrators include (a) keeping your administrator informed. If they are informed before a difficult situation arises, they can more readily offer support; (b) immediately informing your administrator of classroom crises, on-going student bus misbehavior, and parental conflicts, so they are prepared to handle potential problems; (c) informing your administrator of positive student growth, program or curricular changes, and other new ideas you would like to consider; (d) never openly criticizing your

administrator. Instead, apply the "golden rule" by treating your administrators the way you want to be treated. Criticizing your supervisors may negatively impact the relationship you have with them; (e) being proactive and focusing on solutions rather than problems by coming to meetings prepared to discuss challenges and possible solutions and being willing to brainstorm ways to creatively address issues; (f) consistently and genuinely communicating the idea that "It is always about the students you serve." Make individual/ programmatic decisions in the best interest of students rather than an existing philosophy or school culture.

Assessing One's Level of Stress and Burnout

Finally, teachers can identify sources of stress and implement strategies to reduce stress and burnout. Mentally and physically healthy teachers are more effective than those who are burned out. The following strategies address symptoms of stress and burnout:

- Assess if you have the symptoms of burnout.
 - Are you physically ill more frequently than a year ago?
 - Have family or interpersonal problems increased?
 - Has your inability to unwind after work increased?

- Have you decreased your involvement in hobbies?
- Realize in many cases the symptoms of stress and burnout lead to the cure.
 - If you are no longer involved in physical activities or hobbies, etc., do them!
 - If your job is stagnant and boring, change something about it!
 - If your interpersonal socialization has diminished, get together with friends!
 - If you are abusing alcohol and controlled substances, seek professional help!
- Develop coping strategies to alleviate stress and burnout.
 - Realize that stressful conditions and symptoms exist and effect teacher effectiveness.
 - Determine the nature of the symptoms.
 - Develop a plan to revitalize yourself.
 - Remember that it takes time to deal with stress and burnout.
 - Maintain your healthy activities.
 - Reflect on the fact that a job change may or may not be the right decision. Regardless, be sure to take time to develop a plan that addresses the stressful conditions causing your stress (Stiver, 1982).

A checklist for strategies used is summarized in *Table 2*.

Conclusion

Over the past two to three decades, school districts and administrators have faced challenges in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers of students with EBD. The stress and burnout of such teachers have played a significant role in their attrition. This article presented specific strategies for promoting longevity in the areas of (1) developing a positive and adaptive frame of mind; (2) forming positive collegial relationships; (3) using effective organizational

strategies; (4) embracing change, innovation, and new opportunities; (5) collaborating with administrators; and (6) assessing one's level of stress and burnout. Adopting these strategies will help teachers positively manage the challenging tasks associated with teaching students with EBD and assist in maintaining an appropriate balance between work and other parts of one's life. We further believe these strategies can have a significant affect on the field's ability to retain quality teachers for students with EBD.

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