

Stress and Your Locus of Control

The school year has well and truly kicked off and it's probably about now that our intentions of taking better care of ourselves and not letting work overwhelm us are flying out the window. But before we throw in the towel and succumb to the ever-increasing pressure of work demands, let's try reframing how we think about and deal with stress.

Historically, stress was useful because it helped us survive (fight, flight or freeze), in response to a threat to our physical well-being. However, our bodies can't distinguish between **real** and **perceived** threats and a stress response can be psychologically or physically **detrimental** to our health and wellbeing.

If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.

African Proverb

It's important that we commit to tackling this problem and use a **preventative** approach as opposed to one of managing the symptoms. Identifying your individual causes of stress and acting before they overwhelm you is a critical strategy, but this is not enough – change will only occur if prevention is supported on an administrative and systemic level. We need to acknowledge that in order to minimise stress, sometimes compromises will need to be made.

Significant workload is also a major contributor to stress and anxiety for staff who work in schools. Asking for help from leaders, accessing digital resources for ideas or strategies (eg Facebook, Pinterest or email lists) and drawing on collegial relationships can all help to lighten the load. Taking steps to declutter the curriculum is another way for this to occur. School leaders can reduce staff stress by finding ways to simplify and streamline processes without increasing the demands placed on staff.

Psychologist Julian Rotter discusses the stress we experience at work in relation to our **perception** of a situation. This is called the '**locus of control**' and can either be **internal** (we believe we have control) or **external** (we believe outside factors have control). While most of us are a combination of both, we tend to favour one over the other and recognising where our locus of control lies can help us better deal with stress. Leaders and staff teams working on reducing staff stress can best support staff by avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to improving well-being, as our locus of control is both individualised and difficult to change. While having an internal locus of control could be an advantage, stress prevention strategies also need to support those with an external locus of control as well.

For example, attending a yoga class may help you lower your stress levels, especially if you have an internal locus of control. However, the yoga class will do little for those with an external locus of control. They will find it hard to relax during the yoga, knowing the mountain of work is still waiting for them afterwards.

If we have an external locus of control, we will feel less stress if we are involved in decisions about where our time is spent, especially in regards to meetings and professional development. We can feel over-committed or believe these tasks are a waste of our time if we don't have input. This can impact on our perceived view of ourselves as professionals, increasing our stress levels.

Where is your 'locus of control'?

Key points

Stress is natural

Stress is related to our perception of a situation/event

Prevention is better than management

Stress needs to be dealt with on an individual, administrative and systemic level

Take action to reduce your workload and your stress – ask for help

'Locus of control' can be internal (we have control) or external (the environment controls events)

Identify your locus of control and take steps to prevent stress

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