

# Survival Strategies for New Teachers: Ten Ways To Avoid Stress

submitted by  
Tony Murphy, O'Connell Secondary School  
Dublin, Ireland, [tonymurp@iol.ie](mailto:tonymurp@iol.ie)

New teachers always feel stressed-out during the first year in the classroom. For many, it is really too late to be reading books on stress reduction. Anyway, many of these books are really geared to the situations that new teachers regularly find themselves in. More importantly, how does a new teacher evaluate which of the suggestions to be found in stress-management texts will be most appropriate, and which will work.

In my work with new teachers, I have made many suggestions as to how they can reduce the stress of the first months of their careers. In discussing the end results with them the following 10 suggestions seem to have been the most effective.

1. Thorough lesson preparation. It may be part of the job, but it seems to markedly reduce anxiety. Being clear in your mind about what you are going to do during the class period, means that you do not have to think on your feet. This frees up your mental resources to deal with the unpredictable. Remember that the unexpected will usually happen, so build a little flexibility into your plans. Also bear in mind that either you or some member in the class may not be in top form that day. One or more of you may not be able to give 100%. You are the leader in the classroom, so have some fallback plan to bring into operation should the need arise. For example you may carry a set of special worksheets to accompany an emergency video or audio tape that you are holding in reserve.
2. Ensure that you understand the work you are about to teach. The last thing that you need to happen is to be suddenly stuck in the middle of a math problem on the board. With your back turned to the class, trying to see where you have gone wrong, you make a very inviting target. Being seen to be in command of your subject area is a great boost to the confidence of the students that look to you as their instructional leader.
3. Keeping the paperwork up to date. The students in class are far from the only source of stress. Heads of Department, Principals, Parents, Education Councils, all quite rightly need to know how things are progressing. Record keeping, correction, worksheet preparation and general paperwork may be the bane of the profession but well worth keeping under control. Falling behind and letting the paperwork mount up is a great source of stress in many professions and occupations including teaching.
4. Make an effort to get to know your students as individuals. Each of us finds it more difficult to operate in front of an audience of strangers. Students that realize you are interested in their welfare, are more likely to treat you with some understanding and respect.
5. Ask the advice of other more experienced teachers. Care and diplomacy may be needed here. Advice from teachers tends to fall into three categories. First is the "ignore-it-at-your-peril" advice that comes from your Head of Department, follow this at all costs. Then there is the advice that is offered whether you want it or not. This kind should be listened to politely, and forgotten. The genuinely useful advice that you will receive usually comes in response to a request from you. However just talking about a difficulty seems to help make it seem less of a problem. A trouble shared is a trouble halved and all that.
6. Ask your friends among other new teachers their advice. They are closer to the problems than more experienced teachers are. Teaching and holding the attention of a class may become second nature to an experienced teacher. S/He may not even be aware of the new techniques that are being used to motivate the students. Your peers may have come across the same problem as you, and may have found a solution already. Again, just talking about it helps.
7. Make lists of the things that you hope to get through in a day or through the week. This can be very useful in taking the strain from your overloaded brain. Beware the trap inherent in making lists. Don't think that you will get through every point on your list. Learn from last week's list and plan to get through less this week.
8. Encourage your students to be more independent. Suggest that the more able among them work on into their topic when they have completed their assigned work ages before the rest. This can help take the strain of finding extra work for them from your shoulders.
9. In the staff-room chat with colleagues about recreational activities. There are other things in life to talk about other than school.
10. Above all, accept that you will make mistakes. Accept them as a learning experiences and forgive yourself. Do not spend long hours worrying how things might have been if only you had acted differently or if only you had not said what you did.

One factor worthy of note is that most new teachers by the end of their first year felt that working harder did not decrease their stress levels.

Obviously what works for these new teachers might not work for you, for reasons of gender (most of these were female), personality, situation, age and so on but they may be worth a try in this difficult first year — before reaching for the Yoga manual or the tranquilizers.

Good luck!