

CATHOLIC TEACHERS'
MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERIES

Understanding Stress

It is important to self-reflect and take your mental health needs seriously. To support Catholic teachers and help you reflect on your mental health and wellness, the Association has developed the **Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series**. In this resource we discuss stress – what it is, how to identify it, and how to manage it.

What is Stress?

The term “stress” began as an engineering term that referred to mechanical or physical pressure being exerted on a material or object. It has evolved to include the human response to mental and emotional pressures. The Oxford Dictionary defines stress as a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances. Given that stress is created through a person’s response to events and circumstances, everyone’s reactions to, and thus their experience of, stress will be different.

The stress you experience may help you to rise to challenges – keeping you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpening your concentration when you are playing a game, or driving you to study for an exam when you would rather be watching television. Of course, you may also experience the opposite, including a lack of concentration and heightened anxiety leading to an inability to perform.

Beyond a certain point, the stress you experience stops being helpful. When the stress you experience becomes overwhelming, it can affect your mood, productivity, and relationships, while also damaging your health and quality of life.

The ongoing experience of stress may gradually insert itself into your everyday routine, becoming your new “normal.” This process can increase your ability to incorporate high levels of stress, but in an eventually debilitating way. You may consider yourself in control of work or life circumstances, when in fact you are overwhelmed and exhausted.

Learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, including your reactions to certain triggers or stressors, is key to reducing the adverse effects of stress. Once you recognize the signs and symptoms, you may be able to take appropriate steps to reduce the harmful effects of the stressors in your life.

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Disproportionate Impacts of Stress

Different people have different experiences of stress. These experiences range from relationship changes, to financial difficulties or changes in employment, to name a few. In addition to these events, stress can also be cumulative based on a variety of external circumstances, such as systemic discrimination and the identity-induced stress resulting from the microaggressions some experience regularly.

Researcher Bruce McEwan calls the different experiences of stress based on environmental factors “allostatic load.” Allostatic load is “the wear and tear on the body of having to maintain its internal equilibrium in the face of changing and challenging circumstances, trauma salient among them.” (Gabor Maté & Daniel Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness & Healing in a Toxic Culture*).

Researchers Gabor Maté and Julian Maté further explain:

“[S]ome people are far more physiologically burdened than others...And while the personal stresses of a disconnect from the self and the loss of authenticity may cut across class lines, the allostatic strain imposed by imbalances of power falls most onerously on the politically disempowered and economically disenfranchised.” (Maté and Maté, 276.)

Thus, the impact of world events, systemic discrimination, intergenerational trauma, ableism, and other forms of prejudice can disproportionately increase the stressors some people face. At the same time, there is great diversity of experience within identity groups. As an example, the experiences of anti-Black racism for one person might differ from that of another. Likewise, the oppressions 2SLGBTQIA+ communities might experience are not all the same. These also differ when a person holds multiple equity-deserving identities, such as Indigenous, Catholic, and Two-Spirit as an example. Living in a world which values white, straight identities over those who are not, can increase stress. At the same time, celebrating equity-deserving identities as a source of strength and empowerment is essential.

Trauma expert Judith Herman suggests that the most important thing we can do when supporting anyone is to listen. This honours that each experience is unique, and that everyone has the opportunity to self-define. Herman links this to justice:

“... survivors of violence, who know in their bones the truths that many others would prefer not to know, can lead the way to a new understanding of justice. The first step is to ask survivors what would make things right – or as right as possible – for them. This sounds like such a reasonable thing to do, but in practice, it is hardly ever done. Listening, therefore, turns out to be a radical act.” (Herman, Judith Lewis. *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*).

All OECTA members and leaders benefit from listening to others and reciprocally being heard. If you are reading this document to help OECTA members as an Association leader, taking the time to listen is potentially the most important act you can offer. If you are reading this document to address your own stressors as a member of an equity-deserving group, OECTA acknowledges that systems such as this Association bear responsibility for addressing prejudice. Taking care of yourself and accessing resources available through the Association to do so, is important.

Resisting Stereotypes: An Intersectional Approach to Mental Health and Wellness

It is important to resist stereotypes which might reduce a person to only one aspect of their identity and experience. This approach acknowledges intersectionality, which creates spaces where people can bring their whole selves into a context and at the same time have affinity spaces which permit connections based on shared identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose work largely popularized the idea of intersectionality, suggests:

“People of color within LGBTQ movements; girls of color in the fight against the school-to-prison pipeline; women within immigration movements; trans women within feminist movements; and people with disabilities fighting police abuse – all face vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, class oppression, transphobia, ableism, and more. Intersectionality has given many advocates a way to frame their circumstances and to fight for their visibility and inclusion.” (Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait.”)

It is also important to have a trauma-sensitive response acknowledging:

“[I]n the face of death, injury, and violation, some people nevertheless persist and grow in knowledge and love. Situated in every time and place, communicating through diverse languages and communal commitments, these people and their allies have wisdom to share.” (DuBois, Heather M. “Empowerment and Transformation: Correlating John of the Cross and Judith Herman for Trauma Healing”, *International Journal of Practical Theology*).

If you are new to the concept of being trauma-sensitive, or trauma-informed, see the Association’s resource: [Understanding Trauma](#), for more information.

Stress Related to Allyship

Allies can also experience additional stress. Carefully selecting the role of ally, accomplice and/or, co-conspirator (see Catholic Teachers’ Safer Spaces Series for further definitions of these terms) as the situation requires is key to facilitating dialogue in relationships. Doing this can alleviate the stress that some experience in union and classroom contexts.

In her May 2022 thesis, researcher Kristen Maclin found:

“Most of the time, when an ally stands up for Black, and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), they do not think they will experience backlash from their peers (Gorski, 2019). Although allies did not anticipate backlash, Gorski’s study identified backlash as a reason for burnout. In many cases, the allies who stand up for BIPOCs experience secondary byproducts of racist structures and attitudes. Though it happens, it by no means is at the same level or comparable to what BIPOCs experience daily.” (Maclin, Kristen, “The White Ally Experience: A Look Into the Impacts of Being a White Ally”).



Warning Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Everyone's reaction to stress is different, however, there are some signals and symptoms that are common warning signs.

We often think of stress as something that is external or caused by other people (for example, office workload or deadlines). It is your response to these circumstances that produces stress in your life. The key to reducing stress, and its health implications, is to learn to recognize problematic symptoms when they occur and to find better ways to manage your reactions to the stressors or triggers you identify in your life.

The following lists contain some of the common symptoms associated with stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the greater the potential that the stress you are experiencing will have implications for your health and well-being.

Keep in mind that the symptoms of stress can also be caused by other psychological and medical problems. If you are experiencing any of the warning signs of stress listed in the table below, it is important to see a doctor for a full evaluation. Your doctor can help you determine the source of your symptoms and if they are indeed stress related.

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS	PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memory problems• Inability to concentrate• Poor judgement• Seeing only the negative• Anxious or racing thoughts• Constant worrying	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aches and pains• Diarrhea or constipation• Nausea or dizziness• Chest pain or rapid heartbeat• Loss of sex drive• Frequent colds• Exhaustion
EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS	BEHAVIOURAL SYMPTOMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moodiness• Irritability or short temper• Agitation or inability to relax• Feelings of being overwhelmed• Sense of loneliness and isolation• Depression or general unhappiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating more or less• Sleeping too much or too little• Isolating yourself from others• Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities• Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax• Nervous habits (e.g., nail biting or pacing)

Implications for Health and Wellness

Many researchers have confirmed that teachers around the world are more vulnerable than other workers to burnout symptoms (Fernet, C., Guay, F., Senecal, C., & Austin, S. Predicting Individual Changes in Teacher Burnout) and are at a high risk of emotional exhaustion (Olivier, E., Lazariuk, L., Archambault, I., & Morin, A. J. S. (2024). “Teacher emotional exhaustion: The synergistic roles of self-efficacy and student–teacher relationships”). It is critical to see the issue of your health and wellness holistically. It encompasses physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. As such, it is important to attend to your “whole self” and be mindful of how any stress you may be experiencing is impacting your overall well-being.

As noted in the previous section, there are a number of ways stress can manifest itself in unhealthy behaviours. Consistently dealing with high levels of stress over time can lead to burnout and/or result in more severe physical, mental, and emotional illness and in severe cases, even disease.

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by the impact of excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place. Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

Many illnesses and even diseases can be caused by, or exacerbated by, the continued experience of high levels of

stress. When illness and disease occur in the body, this is also an indication of a “dis-ease” within the soul. There is a corollary between our physical self and our spiritual self that should not be overlooked, especially since the impacts of the stress we experience can be so pervasive.

Implementing strategies to mitigate the impact of stress on your physical person are important. However, it is also important to implement strategies to promote wellness of the whole person and reflect on how interior forces may be a partner in accelerating the effects of stress on your body, mind, and soul.

Understanding Your Work Environment

Teaching is a complex and intense profession. The education system reflects our society and is subject to political decisions over which we have no control. Because we work with children and young people, we are subject to close and constant scrutiny. What teachers do and say as individuals is thoroughly examined by administration, parents, the public, and the Ontario College of Teachers. This stress can be exacerbated by the increased physical symptoms we experience when under stress, as well as the load caused by systemic prejudices such as racism, bigotry, homophobia, and ableism among other oppressions.

Every day in our classrooms, teachers must address increasing social problems, parental concerns, increased violence, challenges to working conditions, fewer resources and supports, frequent curriculum changes, and standardized tests, to name a few. They are things over which we have little control and that can become overwhelming.

The results of our efforts are not always immediately apparent. We sometimes wonder whether we are being successful with our students, and it is easy to feel disheartened. There is so much to do in any given day and so little time to meet all our students' needs.

Understanding the environment in which you work is key to helping you manage your stress and overall health. Knowing what you can change, working towards that change, and understanding and accepting the things you cannot change will enable you to better control your reactions and manage how much stress you allow into your life.

Other Examples of Workplace Stressors

- Major change
- Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA)
- Administrative paperwork
- Lack of peer support
- Student assessment and evaluation
- Reporting to parents
- Lack of clear job expectations or descriptors
- Little affirmation for your work
- Heavy workload, long working hours, and large class sizes
- Poor communication with peers and administration
- Inadequate or irregularly applied discipline policies
- Violence in schools
- Conflict with other teachers and professionals
- Little opportunity to participate in decision-making
- Criticism of the profession
- Lack of administrative supports
- Failure of administration to encourage power-sharing and collaboration
- Misunderstanding and miscommunication
- Unreasonable expectations

Get Help When Needed

By recognizing and addressing problems early, you can help to prevent more serious issues from developing. Your school colleagues, local OECTA unit, and the Counselling and Member Services department staff at Provincial Office can assist and suggest strategies to help you deal with different problems you experience.

Your local OECTA unit can help you obtain support through your employee assistance program (EAP) and will be able to answer questions regarding access to sick leave, medical benefits, or long-term disability (LTD), and workplace accommodations. See OECTA's Summary of Mental Health Resources for a variety of program available to members of the Association.





**Don't be afraid to ask for help.
Remember that you are not alone.**

**OECTA Counselling and Member Services
1-800-268-7230**

» Additional Resources available at catholicteachers.ca

Catholic Teachers' Mental Health and Wellness Series

- [Distinguishing Mental Health from Mental Illness](#)
- [Strategies to Promote Mental Health](#)
- [Resource List - Mental Health and Wellness](#)
- [Understanding Anxiety and Depression](#)
- [Understanding Mental Illness](#)
- [Understanding Stress](#)

Catholic Teachers' Safer Spaces Series

- [Safer Spaces? Braver Spaces? - Our Collective Responsibility](#)
- [Understanding Trauma](#)
- [Being a Trauma-informed Release Officer](#)