

Resiliency in These Crazy Times Through Positive Psychology and Mindfulness

By Shari Tarver-Behring, Ph.D.

Resiliency, which is defined as the ability to recover quickly in the face of adversity, has never been more needed in the teaching profession than right now. Let's look around at what's happening in our community's schools. Pink slips are being issued by the thousands. Changes and reduction in support staff abound. Class size increases are the norm. Teachers are being asked to do more with less. All these pressures add to the normal stress of the classroom teacher, if they are lucky enough to retain their position. Mindfulness and Positive Psychology can assist our teachers in coping with today's stressors, and ultimately, make teachers more resilient for these crazy times.

The counseling community has long been fascinated with the human condition called stress. Stress is a physical, mental, and/or emotional reaction to an event that affects our body and mind. Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes us feel frustrated, angry, nervous, or anxious. Studies have shown that it is important to first, identify the source of stress; second, determine the impact of stress on a person physically, emotionally, and mentally; third, determine the methods available to reduce stress. These methods include either direct solutions that re-

move the stressor, such as leaving a stressful situation, or indirect solutions, which are coping mechanisms to reduce stress. For most teachers, it is hoped that indirect coping mechanisms will assist them in building resiliency to stay with their career path despite obstacles, rather than directly removing themselves from the stress by quitting.

The two articles in this issue provide philosophical approaches with excellent coping mechanisms to reduce stress and build resiliency for teachers. These approaches can be extremely helpful whether a teacher actually gets temporarily laid off, or retains one's position but is under an onslaught of pressure while doing so.

One of these approaches, Positive Psychology, has been a passion of Dr. Greg Jackson's for many years. This approach encourages each person to gain a better understanding of their individual strengths and how to draw on these. In addition, Positive Psychology places an emphasis on how to appreciate the strengths of others. All too



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often, a reaction to stress is a feeling of helplessness, low self-esteem, and blame. Dr. Jackson has led numerous groups involved with the counseling field, teacher education, and educational leadership in building a strengths-based culture that leads to greater self awareness, shared resources, and mutual support through a positive exchange of ideas. This positive outlook and interaction with others has been shown by studies to lead to greater resiliency and personal happiness despite the stressors in the external world.

A second approach, Mindfulness, has been studied extensively by Dr. Diane Gerhart. She has actually traveled to Tibet to conduct research for the many articles she has written on the meditation technique of mindfulness, which is a non-judgmental, sustained attention to one's immediate experience. Studies have shown that it is possible to significantly change one's stress level by practicing Mindfulness for just five minutes a day. This is possible because mindfulness allows a person to gain greater awareness of, and control over, stress responses, and regulate one's own stress

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through positive thoughts.

As teachers approach the end of the year with reflection for all that has transpired, and anticipation for both the good and the bad to come, the ability to

integrate all of the variables that are bombarding us becomes much easier if we have a tool bag of coping skills that help us to remain resilient in the face of adversity, and positive about the fu-

ture. It is my hope for all of you that you will find comfort in the resources provided in this issue, and remain strong in your commitment to your career path, despite these crazy times.

Applied Aspects of Positive Psychology: More than a simple elixir

by Greg Jackson, Ed.D.

“... we believe that intentionally enabling students to identify, understand, and leverage their talents, passions, and strengths allows their unique genius to emerge and sets them on a course for success.”
(Shushok & Hulme. p.4-5)

Have you ever been involved in an activity where you lost track of time, wanted to return to that activity, felt “stoked”, suddenly realize you’re very hungry, energized after the activity, and felt that you just were able to go on “autopilot.” Then you’ve likely experienced what Chicksentmehi termed, “the zone” or “flow.” That is a practical awareness of positive psychology.

After some four months reading hundreds of articles and maybe thousands of websites, I came face to face with a set of strategies that instantly helped me see back to elementary school and understand how and why over those five decades, I came upon the positive and fairly accomplished life I had created. It was as if I had the words that captured my uniqueness, and in other words, “my personal excellence.” In that moment I was given the key for me to know not only how and why certain occupational, life, and educational choices came to be and also how and in what specific situations I could excel AND how I do use that knowledge to be at my best in challenging and even unpleasant situations.

If children could begin to understand this in elementary and middle school, what personal, academic and life options would be possible for them? If they could know how they learned best, how to use their own pattern of excellence to increase engagement in assignments, how to make nearly any

class or subject more interesting, then they could learn how to be more centered, less susceptible to emotional swings, and create a more positive and amenable outlook on life.

What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is a field of endeavor that has benefited from the most recent brain research. It proposes that over the first fifteen years of life, an individual will basically “train” their brain to work in the manner found to be most effective by the individual. So based on the patterns of thought, activity, and behaviors we create and return to again and again, we actually build a neural net of preferred neuron connections. These can be termed *talents*. As we develop the ability to use these talents more effectively, we learn when and how they can best be used, we develop *knowledge* of these talents. At some point, when we can access these at will and apply them with perfect execution, the skill level of these talents can be termed *strengths*. So positive psychology can be defined as “an individual’s ability to access and perform certain behaviors and apply certain attitudes and beliefs to a level of perfection.”



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The research is clear, when we access our strengths we are able to engage more creative problem solving, we find the tasks more engaging and more enjoyable, and we are developing a foundation for better mental health and a more positive outlook on life. Strangely, all of us have been introduced to the maxims of our ancestors and folklore that, “You catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar,” “When you smile the world smiles with you, when you frown you frown alone,” and “A frown is a smile upside down.” As children we typically accepted these from our elders, but no one could anticipate the scientific evidence to support these contentions.

Personal Uses of Positive Psychology

My wife, Dr. Jay Jackson, is a school psychology administrator for LAUSD. She’s initiated a group of colleagues in applying positive psychology to increasing resilience in foster children. She and her colleagues have noticed a demonstrable difference in the effectiveness of her colleagues who utilize a strengths perspective.

Personally, I can say that when my wife and I better understood our strengths, our already vibrant relationship was improved as we had the vocabulary to understand, appreciate, and accept each other’s unique patterns of excellence. In business and industry, using positive psychology, or what is termed a

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Dear Doctors:

Sometimes I really wonder if I chose the right field to study and work in. So many things are difficult and stressful. My peers seem to be very talented and they are managing it all – but I often feel like I'm not making a difference.

-feeling crazy

Dear Feeling:

The thoughts and fears you expressed in this question are unfortunately very common among teachers – especially newer teachers. Thoughts like this also frequently emerge among other highly skilled professionals who are diligent and hard-working, and who set high standards for themselves. So take pride that you possess those qualities – they are the qualities that you will rely on to help you find ways to cope with these difficult emotions and thoughts.

Actually, intermittent re-examination of one's career path is not unusual, and

certainly does not mean one is "crazy". During stressful times, however, one's doubts about effectiveness can have a damaging impact affecting various aspects of job performance. Feeling a high level of intensity at work wears on a person the same way running a car at high RPMs over a long period of time can strain the car. The feeling of being overwhelmed can occur from a wide range of sources of stress, such as excessive work demands, personal life crises, administrative pressures, budget changes – and all of these can lead to burn-out.

How do we process job stress in a healthy way? First, do your best to be accurate in your thoughts. Although it is important to listen to your own questions and concerns about career choice (because those are sometimes valid), one must not immediately assume that feelings of inadequacy provide evidence of your insufficiencies. Our fears are real, but that doesn't mean they are based on accurate perceptions. Career uncertainty may, in fact, simply be an understandable reaction to high levels of job stress, job transition, or fatigue.

Next, to cope effectively with stressful times it is vitally important to be kind to yourself. There are important reasons to be careful about how much attention you pay to your own "inner demons" (self-doubts). Teaching is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. Remember that, like any professional, to be effective you

must maintain a confident and focused presentation that is task-oriented and productive, so that is likely what your impressive-appearing peers are doing. But that is external presentation. It can be self-destructive to indulge in comparing your internal dialogue with what you believe a colleague's internal dialogue is. The biggest reason to limit this tendency is that you really have no idea what another person's internal dialogue actually is. The only data that you can base your presumptions on is their external presentation, which may not be reflective at all of their inner experience. So this activity will undoubtedly be misleading, unproductive, and unkind to yourself.

Also, assess if you are striving for perfection and in the process disconnecting with yourself. As a teacher you spend a great deal of your day giving to others, so it is important that you make time for rest, rejuvenation, and remembering who you are as an individual and what you need.

Finally, realize that questions about one's competence and choice of profession are certainly difficult to experience, but they are nonetheless a common occurrence that frequently emerges in the challenging phases of what often turns out to be a very meaningful and productive career "journey".



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Please submit your questions for
"The Doctors Are In" to: t-care@csun.edu

Positive Psychology (Jackson) (Continued from page 2)

"strengths perspective," is more common in training and development, management training for mentoring subordinates, and developing plans to increase employee engagement and strengths development. In higher education, the Gallup Corporation hosts an annual conference with some of more than 500 private liberal arts colleges and private universities that have introduced the "strengths perspective" on their campuses. These colleges and uni-

versities thread a strengths perspective through their academic and/or student affair programs. This annual event enables various campuses to share the best of their strengths programming and strategies. Their programs and strategies are based on the extraordinary research of the Gallup's strengths assessment, the StrengthsFinder 2.0.

Finally, how about introducing this technology to school staffs, faculty, and parent communities to assist par-

ents help their children at home to be better able to improve engagement and perform academically?

Shuskok & Hulme (2006). What's right with you: Helping students find and use their personal strengths. About Campus, 11, 4, p. 2-8. (Sept/October).

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Mindfulness for Stress Management

by Diane R. Gehart, Ph.D

“The greatest challenge most people face is taking five minutes out of their busy schedules to ward off stress.”



Dr. Gehart is a Professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at CSUN

Mindfulness, a simple meditation technique, is one of the best evidence-based practices for managing stress. Committing as little as five-minutes a day to this practice can dramatically change the level of stress you experience each day. The greatest challenge most people face is taking five minutes out of their busy schedules to ward off stress. So, if you want to give it a try, here are some simple suggestions for getting started.

What is Mindfulness?

- Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, sustained attention to your immediate experience. Most cultures have some form of mindfulness practice, the most common of which is *mindfulness breath meditation*.

- Mindfulness breath meditation involves non-judgmentally observing your breath by redirecting your mind to refocus each time it wanders off to other thoughts. Typically, your mind will wander off numerous times per minute.

- Each time you redirect your focus back to your breath, you are improving your ability to regulate your emotions and stress response and increasing your tendency for positive mood and overall disposition.

Why Bother Practicing Mindfulness?

- Recent research studies indicate that regular mindfulness practice can be helpful for a number of physical and mental problems, including chronic pain, skin conditions, cancer treatment, immunity, depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar, panic disorders,

personality disorders, and other stress related disorders.

- Preliminary brain research indicates that after as little as 8 weeks of mindfulness practice, there was a sustained increase in activity in centers of the brain associated with positive mood and disposition as well as immune system functioning. Thus, after a relatively short period of time, there are measurable changes in brain and body functioning.
- Current theories and brain research indicate that regular mindfulness practice can increase compassion for others and oneself, resulting in improved self-esteem and relational functioning.

Making Time for Mindfulness Practice

- A good way to start making mindfulness part of daily practice is to set aside 2-10 minutes per day for 5-7 days per week. Short frequent sessions are better than long but less frequent practices. Start with 2 minutes and build up to 10.

- Identify your most regular habits (meal times, working out, work schedule, television shows, bedtime, etc.) and find time before, during, or after one of these activities during which you can fit in mindfulness.

- ◊ Ex: add 5 minutes of mindfulness before or after meals
- ◊ Ex: Meditate 5-10 minutes before watching TV at night
- ◊ Ex: Meditate during the first/last 5 minutes of your lunch hour; or 10 minutes before work starts; or 10 minutes at end of workday.

Mindfulness Techniques and Strategies

- **Focus:** Observe your breath by focusing on the nostrils or belly movement while quieting inner chatter. You can also try counting each breath up to ten and then repeating from the beginning; many find counting makes it easier to quiet the mind. Others find it help to use a mantra or focusing words attached to the in-and exhalation, such as “peace in, peace out,” “be peace,” or any simple phrase that focuses you.

- **Refocusing:** There are many options for refocusing when your mind wanders off, which it will do several times a minute in most cases. The most important part is to choose a refocusing technique that reminds you to be patient and nonjudgmental with yourself (e.g., don’t beat yourself up or put yourself down) when you find that your mind has wandered off.

- Some options for redirecting your focus:

- ◊ “Ah, that too”: Ah, that too, is running through my mind.

- ◊ Labeling: When you catch mind wandering, you can label each thought, e.g. “worry,” “planning,” “anger,” “feeling,” “thought.”

- ◊ Clouds/Bubble Image: You can imagine the thought or feeling as a cloud or bubble that floats away.

- **Seating:** It is generally considered best to sit upright yet relaxed posture on the edge of a hard chair or cushion. If this is too uncomfortable, you may also lie down or sit back in a chair.

- **Timer:** It is often very helpful and motivating to set a timer to set boundaries on your practice. You may use an egg timer, a timer on your mobile phone, buy a meditation timer

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PRINCIPAL'S CORNER

with Julie Fabrocini

As educators we talk a lot about collaboration. One of the things that we don't do often enough is examine how collaboration impacts our resilience. In that vein, give a little thought to relationships with families. Does that cause you stress? That is an entirely reasonable feeling. More face time, so many vastly different perspectives and situations. We serve the public and the public is diverse.

At the CHIME Charter Schools, our ability to bounce back is enhanced by our relationships with others. We use a strategy of keeping the doors wide open to families. It is not always easy, but we know our most important partners are the people who have much more invested in our students than we do. When we build trust with families, we sustain effective relationships around children's needs. Acknowledging that families have the most expertise and investment in our students is one of the crucial aspects of building that trust and establishing connections with families. No matter how dedicated we are, as paid professionals we walk away at the end of each day, week or school year and it's the families who will know and guide children as they grow. It is families who are keepers of hopes and dreams for students. Evidence indicates that these relationships are worth cultivating. Research findings provide clear links between parent/teacher partnerships and student success (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Everyone is busy. Finding the time to partner with families is a quandary in education today when so much is already being asked of teachers. How can we share information with families in the most effective ways? As instructional leaders, CHIME Elementary and Middle School teachers are in charge of providing information about what is going on in their classrooms and grade levels. This is the easier part of collaborating with families and the part we have control over. A weekly newsletter, group emails, and home/school communication logs are all great ways for teachers to send information. Access for families to view homework and grades online with a protected password is very popular among CHIME Middle School parents. When families are informed, it makes our professional lives better.

Sitting down to exchange information about individual students... now that can require more finesse. First of all, everybody's busy, right? Teachers wear so many hats in a professional climate that is uncertain. When we dig in amid the chaos that surrounds education right now and use the resources that parents and families bring, we are using every scrap of information that is available to us. Being open and flexible is probably the single best way to communicate the importance of family partnerships. Being sensitive and respectful is the best way to preserve them. Once we master it, the power to



Julie Fabrocini is Executive Director, Charter Schools CHIME Institute

impact learning through building relationships will always be with us. Professionalism sustained by experience. More resilience.

What should we do when it's bumpy? Consider frame of reference, ours, the family's, the student's. Ask yourself to examine the emotional aspects of any situation. In a learning community, stakeholders come from different places and have vastly different perspectives. As we acknowledge those differences exist and work towards valuing them, we move forward on our own path of cultural proficiency (Lindsay, Nuri-Robbins & Terrell, 2009). All of those strategies we work so hard on in our grade or subject level teams can be useful. A concerted act of listening, showing openness and a willingness to consider changes based on family input is the essence of collaboration. We work so hard on solution finding with colleagues to bolster our expertise, incorporating families is the next logical step.

Lindsey, R. Nuri Robbins, K. & Terrell, R. (2009). *Cultural Proficiency: A Manual For School Leaders*. 3rd Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
 Sheldon, S. & Epstein, J., (2005). *Involvement Counts: Family and Community Partnerships*. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 98 (4), 196-207.

ZITS By Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman



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FROM THE TRENCHES...

School psychologists are more involved in “academic achievement” than simply assessing students for their cognitive and social-emotional levels. In addition to conducting psychoeducational evaluations, we are fervently providing educational and behavioral consultation to and in collaboration with our fabulous teachers and administrators, counseling students and often staff, actively participating in Student Success Teams and producing staff developments, and writing comprehensive reports. This time of year is especially taxing for everyone ‘in the trenches!’ We can usually feel a rising level of anxiety beginning in March each school

year. This year is especially poignant because our students are exhibiting extraordinarily heightened levels of stress, which may be affecting their ability to focus on academic achievement and appropriate behavior. Even our youngest students know ‘grown-up’ words like “mortgage,” “foreclosure”, and “eviction.” These are provocative challenges for support personnel!

In addition, students are now bringing even more ‘baggage’ to school, which appears to be affecting our teachers. Several teachers recently revealed to me that they feel like they have not helped one of our



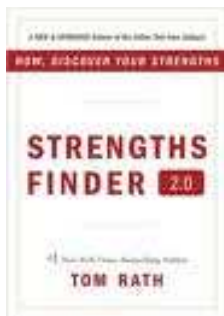
neediest struggling students. I reminded them that when they “catch” him sitting still, writing his

name on his paper, or finishing an assignment . . . when they provide him with skill-specific positive praise, they are possibly THE ONLY person in his life who is truly focused on him! He’s going to feel their passion for teaching; they are making a difference in his life! Sometimes it just takes a little reminder!

Suzie Bornstein is the School Psychologist at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center

T-CARE Recommends...

Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?



features personalized Strengths Insight Report, an Action-Planning Guide, and a web-based Strengths Community.

Chances are, you don't. All too often, our natural talents go untapped. We devote more time to fixing our shortcomings than to developing our strengths. StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment

In StrengthsFinder 2.0 Gallup unveiled the *new and improved* version of its popular assessment, language of 34 themes, and much more. While you can read this book in one sitting, you'll use it as a reference for decades.



The Pursuit of HAPPYness

Will Smith stars in the inspirational true story of Chris Gardner, a San Francisco salesman who's struggling to make ends meet while raising his 5-year-old son. Chris' determination finally pays off when he lands an unpaid internship in a brutally competitive



stockbroker-training program, where only one in twenty interns will make the cut. But without a salary, Chris and his son are evicted from their apartment and are forced to sleep on the street, in homeless shelters and even behind the locked doors of a metro station bathroom. With self-confidence and the love and trust of his son, Chris rises above his obstacles to become a Wall Street legend.

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T-CARE is dedicated to help teaching professionals, at all experience levels, to explore the developmental stages in their career. Through this process, T-CARE will endeavor to establish and maintain a close, mutually-supportive network of teaching professionals who will work together to:

- gain a deep appreciation for the challenges all helping professionals confront,
- sensitize teaching professional to the value of cognitive and behavioral self-affirming practices, and
- help them to develop higher levels of resiliency and job satisfaction.

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Mindfulness (Gehart)

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(www.zenclocks.com), or download one on your computer (Mac: meditation timer widget free; PC: Buddha bell softpedia.com for purchase; iPhone: meditation apps for purchase.

- **Environment:** It may be easiest at the beginning to meditate in a quiet location, but it is not neces-



sary. Distractions can be helpful in improving your focus.

Resources

Download lectures, free guided

meditations, and meditations logs at www.dianegehart.com

UCLA has a mindfulness research center that offers classes to the public and conducts mindfulness studies on ADHD www.marc.ucla.edu.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction research and information at www.mbsr.mass.edu.





SAVE THE DATE
SEPT 24 & 25,



Keynote :
Don Deshler,
Ph.D.

University of Kansas
 Center for Research and Learning

Who should attend?
 Administrators
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