

Being happy and productive in a stressful world



Andrea Ashford

Andrea has worked for over 30 years with families and children, the past 18 of which have been spent as a counsellor and human services trainer. Andrea initially trained as an early childhood teacher, and spent twelve years teaching in early childhood centres. She later completed a Masters Degree in Counselling and a Diploma in Yoga Teaching. Andrea has a private counselling practice in Paddington, where she specializes in the areas of child, adolescent, family and stepfamily issues as well as relationship and individual counselling. In addition, she presents workshops and training seminars in a wide variety of work environments and teaches yoga part time.

Are you feeling more stressed than ever before? If so, you are not alone. I am alarmed at the increasing number of teachers who are seeking my assistance as a Counsellor to manage symptoms of extreme stress, if not, burnout. These symptoms include chronic anxiety, inability to sleep, feelings of inadequacy, irritability and difficulties with professional and personal relationships.

Throughout history, societies have gone through revolutions resulting in dramatic change and we are currently going through one such dramatic and fast-moving revolution. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but adapting to change can be stressful for human beings, particularly if it's rapid change.

The current revolution is all about technological change and the way we generate and communicate information.

Not only are we changing the way we communicate and interact with others, we are also changing the structure of our social networks, the way we solve problems, the way we form our sense of identity and belonging in the world and our physical life in terms of the way we hold and move our bodies.

So what does this mean for early childhood professionals? One major challenge is that we are now required to generate vast amounts of information on a daily basis, as we let people know what we are doing and why we are doing it. The irony is that we then have very little time left to do the job of being mentally and emotionally present for the children we teach.

This reduces the quality of the educational moment, as well as the sense of satisfaction between teacher and child as they engage in the wonderful process of learning.

It is vital now for us to pause and reflect upon the value of the changes we are making to the process of early childhood education. However, the reality is that this revolution has a powerful momentum, so things won't be slowing down.

Therefore, in order to function well and survive in this rapidly changing world, one of the things we must do is become masterful at managing stress.

Six steps to being happy and productive

Step 1. Accept that stress has always been an inevitable part of daily life. It's just that now, this is even more the case.

Accepting this fact, rather than resisting and resenting it is the first step towards reducing stress levels and preserving personal energy. We cannot change anything until we accept it. Resistance doesn't change a situation, it just makes it more stressful.

However, this acceptance does not mean a passive resignation or 'giving in' to the demands being placed upon us. Keep reminding yourself that you have some degree of choice and that you do not need to be an obedient slave to all the expectations that you feel are being made of you. As long as you are being a responsible, hard-working professional, it is reasonable to make decisions as to what you can and can't achieve within the time available in a working day.

Step 2. Clarify the stressors.

Calmly and objectively review the situation and remember that what stresses one person does not necessarily stress another. Further to that, each educational setting will have its unique differences. This clarification process reduces the feeling of overwhelming pressure and empowers you to create a sense of order and priority as you seek ways of reducing the stress.

Take a compassionate attitude by acknowledging that you are a human being doing the best you can. This approach is no different to the way in which you would assist a child who is dealing with difficulties. We must begin with acceptance and kindness towards ourselves.

Step 3. Become self-aware.

Foster increased self-awareness by regularly checking in as to how you are feeling, firstly in terms of body tension (maybe tightness in the head, around the eyes, the jaw, neck, upper chest or upper back). Then, notice breathing patterns. In stressful situations, breathing can become shallow and rapid.

Finally, listen to your thoughts. When we are under pressure, our thoughts or 'self-talk' can become very negative – usually either by being critical of self or of others, or by generating worrisome, fear provoking ideas.

Step 4. Release stress as soon as it starts to build.

As you notice stress building, choose from the following strategies to release stress and prevent further build up:

- **for the body** ... take slow, smooth, deep breaths and stretch out tight muscles.
- **for the mind** ... use constructive 'self talk'! (In particular, watch out for the destructive effects of worry, self criticism and resentment.)
- worry or 'what if' thoughts generate unnecessary fear and the resulting anxiety will stop you taking positive action to address the problem.
- self-criticism will lower your self-esteem and increase your stress levels – thus making it even more difficult to have the confidence to manage a situation.
- resentment will just make you bitter and exhausted – again, making it hard to find constructive ways to deal with the problem.

- use a constructive 'mentor voice' as you guide yourself through the day.

Step 5. Each day, contribute at least one thing (no matter how small) towards creating a positive work environment.

We all make a contribution to the atmosphere of our working environment, so be mindful of the kind of environment you'd like to create for the children, the parents, your colleagues and yourself.

Positive nonverbal contributions include smiles, happy expressions, open posture, laughter etc. Positive verbal contributions include compliments, praise, words of support and encouragement, refusal to gossip, sharing ideas, thank you notes and uplifting written affirmations placed in places you will see them on a regular basis.

Step 6. Work hard at building your resilience ... take this project seriously! It's not mere self-indulgence.

- Be aware of how you speak to yourself. Use the same language you would use with a child or a dear friend.
- Coach yourself through challenging situations. Remind yourself that struggles are a normal part of being human.
- Acknowledge what you've done well ... every day! Celebrate successes.
- Validate your feelings and be patient with yourself.
- Give yourself a gentle 'kick along' sometimes.
- Focus on your strengths and build on these. Don't expect yourself to be great at everything. We are all different.
- Be fair with your expectations of self. Learn from your mistakes. Don't waste time in self punishment – focus on how you wish to improve.
- Be prepared to take a risk.
- Reward yourself for trying.
- Be curious.
- Be spontaneous.
- Have fun – be playful – laugh a lot.
- Treat yourself regularly – you deserve it.
- Have dreams.
- Enjoy simple pleasures.