

# The hidden threat of teacher stress

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When a traumatic event such as the Florida school shooting takes place, often the focus afterward is on finding ways to make sure students and teachers are safe from violence and physical harm.

But there's another danger that threatens teacher well-being that is often overlooked. The threat is stress—and it is something that [nearly half of](#)

[all teachers](#) say they experience at a high level every day.

Teachers are actually [tied with nurses, with 46 percent of both groups reporting high daily stress](#). Such reports are comparable with other notoriously demanding occupations, such as physicians and business managers. It's not hard to understand the reasons why.

Teachers do [much more than teach academic lessons](#). They must also manage classroom behavior and keep an eye on helping students grow and develop socially in a healthy way. On top of that, they must coordinate with other adults and keep records of just about everything they do.

Teachers are [expected to perform these tasks effectively](#), even when their students face difficulties outside the classroom, from unmet needs to mental health issues. The more needs students have, the more teachers are expected to do.

If teachers already face high levels of occupational stress, it's not hard to see how the recent spate of deadly school shootings – coupled with the idea that teachers should arm themselves to protect themselves and their students – can elevate their [stress levels](#) even higher.

We make these observations as researchers affiliated with the Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management at Georgia State University. Among other things, our research focuses on fostering better school and workplace relationships and cultivating safe learning environments.

The consequences of teacher stress are far-reaching and adversely impact [not just the teacher](#), but everyone around them, [most notably their students](#).

## Threats to teacher wellness

For starters, [chronic stress](#) triggers [a range of physical and mental health symptoms](#). Physically, stress weakens the immune system and increases susceptibility to illness. Stress also exacerbates pain and reduces physical stamina.

Prolonged stress may increase risk of chronic fatigue, heart disease and other ailments. Stress also depletes mental stamina. Common symptoms include irritability, mood swings and exhaustion, which may escalate into depression, anxiety and lower quality of life. These symptoms [have been identified by teachers](#) reporting high stress. The consequences, however, do not stop with teachers.

## Threats to teacher job performance

Chronic stress can also impact teachers' [job performance](#). Unwell teachers have a reduced ability to teach and therefore [call in sick](#). The more absences teachers rack up, the less time they spend with their students. Excessive teacher absences disrupt the flow of instruction, behavior management and connection with students. [Research](#) has confirmed that excessive teacher absences are linked to student underachievement.

Stress is also associated with [high teacher turnover](#). Nearly half of all new teachers [leave the field](#) within the first five years. Among those who stay, nearly two-thirds were found in a 2015 [poll](#) to be "not engaged," or mentally and emotionally disconnected from their teaching role and their students' needs.

If nearly half of teachers leave the field within five years, and most who remain are disengaged, there is an epidemic of teachers who are stressed

out, burned out and merely going through the motions.

Research suggests that [active teacher engagement and positive teacher-student relationships](#) result in high student achievement. Similarly, [without active engagement](#), teachers cannot connect with their students and teach them effectively.

## **What can be done to reduce teacher stress?**

There are ways to lessen teacher stress and boost their capacity to perform their best.

School leaders can help reduce teacher stress by cultivating [working conditions](#) that support teachers. Teachers experience [less stress and commit to jobs more often under satisfactory working conditions](#). The working conditions that lead to the most job satisfaction involve [administrative and collegial support](#). In other words, teachers need their leaders to provide constructive feedback that helps improve their performance.

Schools can also help reduce teacher stress by promoting [effective teacher-student interactions](#). One way to accomplish this is by [using strategies](#) that reward positive student behaviors. Teachers in schools with [that utilize positive strategies on a schoolwide basis to support student behavior](#) experience significantly lower levels of burnout. To promote positive teacher-student relationships, experts [recommend a ratio](#) of five positive supports for each punitive action. In other words, teachers should be commending students for doing the right thing five times as often as they take away privileges or scold them for doing the wrong thing.

Teachers also need to make sure they take care of themselves so that they can take care of others. Without actively caring for themselves,

teachers [lose the capacity to care for others](#).

Given the demands of teaching, it may be easy for teachers to put their own needs last. A [comprehensive self-care plan](#) may help teachers identify signs of stress and improve their stress management skills. Examples of stress-reducing strategies with the [most scientific support](#) include yoga, exercise and [mindfulness meditation](#). Yoga and exercise require physical exertion and have benefits beyond [physical fitness](#). Both also trigger hormones that relieve [stress](#) and are associated with better mental focus and mood. No specific skills are required for mindfulness meditation, and with even a few minutes of practice most days, [benefits](#) include improvements to self-awareness, mental concentration and emotion regulation.

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