

Part of your job is to stay healthy and sane, especially in those first few years.

By *Mary Ellen Flannery*

You know what it's like to be a stressed-out student. Remember that night before finals? Cocktails of Red Bull and tears? But the high-stakes stress of a first-year teacher is a whole new experience.

The nightmares: I was naked in front of the class!

The headaches: I collapsed into bed at 6 p.m.

The weight-gain: Good-bye, perfect jeans.

It's not unusual for first-year teachers to actually make themselves sick from stress and long hours. Their classroom lights are still burning at 9 p.m., as they work on the next day's activities, and their eyes are still shining at 3 a.m., as they run through state standards in their mind.

"My principal would come into my room last year and say, 'Why are you still here? Leave!' I'd come in on the weekends and I'd stay until 7 or 8 at night," recalls Laura Winiarczyk, a teacher of English as a Second Language at Manheim Township High School in Pennsylvania.

Not surprisingly, Winiarczyk worked herself into a sick bed. In October, she came down with swine flu—a terrible ordeal for her and also no good for her students, who were deprived of a healthy teacher.

Keep this in mind: A stressed-out, exhausted teacher is not an effective one. For the sake of your health and your students' performance, you should take steps to reduce stress.

Here are a few to try:

Get a hobby.



Winiarczyk put on her swing-dancing shoes in the spring of her first year of teaching. "It saved my sanity," she says. Similarly, new teacher Taylor Dinges, a special educator at Mill Creek Elementary School in Madison City, Alabama, recently discovered that she loves to paint. "I completed my first painting several months ago and I was surprised at how much it relaxed me. An added bonus is that I have new decorations in my house."

Get to sleep.

If you're that college student who never schedules a seminar before 9 a.m., and then strolls into the classroom in floppy-eared bunny slippers, then you're



probably in for a rude awakening (pun intended). Teachers wake up really early. But a lack of sleep will make you even more stressed-out and prone to sickness, and more likely to die young. (Seriously! Go to bed!) If you need to rise at 5 a.m., then make sure your head hits the pillow at least 8 hours earlier,

advises Mary Minnehan, an Education Minnesota trainer.

Eat right.

You want some carbohydrates—those are “feel-good” foods, says Minnehan. “If you take all the carbohydrates out of your diet, you’ll be one cranky person!” she promises. But opt for whole-grains so that you don’t get the “sugar drop,” from empty carbs. Also, when you need a snack, nuts make a good choice.

Exercise.

“Running really helps me on a day that has been particularly challenging,” says Taylor Dinges. Plus, with a job that requires her to be “quick on (her) toes,” a little exercise helps keep her focused and alert. If you don’t have time for a 30-minute jog, check out one of Minnehan’s favorite books, *Eight Minutes in the Morning*, by Jorge Cruise. It offers two different strength-training exercises on a 28-day cycle.

Both Minnehan and the Mayo Clinic recommend yoga to reduce stress. Attempting a yoga pose without clearing your mind of lesson plans and parent conferences is almost impossible. Its practice requires focus and balance. Studies also show it reduces blood pressure and heart rates. Check out a book like, *Office Yoga: Tackling Tension with Stretches You Can Do at Your Desk*.

Breathe.

When you take a deep breath, your brain gets the message to relax—and then it sends that signal to the rest of you. Best part is, you can do it anywhere. Try it now! Feel anything different?

Smile.

The simple act of smiling releases a feel-good hormone to the brain in 44 percent of the population, says Minnehan. Plus, it sends the right message to your students: I like this job! “The more you can smile and enjoy what you’re doing, the



better you’ll feel.”

Make friends.



When Winiarzyk went dancing, she met a group of friends in her new community. Similarly, Dinges says she's so thankful for the support of her best friend, her husband Andy, as well as her co-teacher, mentor, and other colleagues. A good colleague, friend, sibling, or spouse can put your head in the right place—don't be afraid to ask them for help.

Illustrations by Mark Brewer