

# Taking Care of Yourself

Preschool teachers have a rewarding, but intense and demanding, job. Daily stressors such as helping children cope with challenging behavior and conflicts are common. They can be exhausting. Taking time to care for ourselves helps us maintain the health and happiness we need to share joy and laughter with the children—and the other important people in our lives. Bounce back and beat stress by using the following 10 strategies.

## Practice effective communication.

State your feelings in a clear way. For example, “I feel angry when you raise your voice.” Describe what upsets you using facts rather than labels or judgments. Effective communication can reduce conflict and create environments where ideas, problem solving, affection, and caring can thrive.



**Take time to imagine.** Find a comfortable place and close your eyes. Picture a comforting and peaceful setting. Take a moment to rest in this place, taking a few deep breaths. Allow yourself to relax. Visualizing something pleasant is a proven way to reduce stress, and it only takes a few moments each day. (You can find an audio recording of a guided imagery exercise at [www.ecmhc.org/relaxation\\_exercises.html](http://www.ecmhc.org/relaxation_exercises.html).)



## Try belly breathing.

Sit in a chair or stand and place your hands at your side. Close your eyes and focus on your belly. Imagine a small balloon inside. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, and imagine the balloon inflating. Slowly hold for a few seconds. Exhale through your mouth, imagining the balloon slowly deflating. Blow out of your mouth—as if you were blowing out a candle—three times. Deep breathing reduces stress and calms us. You can practice this every day—in the classroom, at home, on the bus, or anywhere!



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## Establish “Me Time!”

Schedule time to enjoy your hobbies. Read a book, garden, dance, or take up something new you have always wanted to do. Stepping out of the same old routine can reenergize your spirit!

## Create consistent and healthy routines.

Listen to soothing music on the way to work every day, drink water, and prepare healthy snacks. Take a walk after work several nights a week. These simple and healthy habits can make a surprisingly big change in the way you feel in a short amount of time.



**Have friend time.** Find ways that friends, family, and colleagues can support you. Share your successes, air your feelings, and ask for help. Realize you are not alone, and together you can help one another.



Adapted, with permission, from the Stress Posters developed by the Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, at Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, funded by the Office of Head Start/ACF, DHHS (#90YD0268) <http://ecmhc.org>. Posters can be found at [www.ecmhc.org/documents/CECMHC\\_GrafittiPosters.pdf](http://www.ecmhc.org/documents/CECMHC_GrafittiPosters.pdf).



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**Focus on what is**

**possible.** Practice focusing on what you have control over in life versus things that are out of your hands, such as how people respond to you or how other people feel. When we focus on things that are out of our control, it can bring us down and increase feelings of anxiousness and stress. When we act on those things that we can control, such as our reactions to events and people, we feel empowered and less stressed.

**Recognize the signs of stress**

Knowing our own signs of stress can help us to meet them head-on, before we feel overwhelmed and run-down. Common signs of stress include

- increased heart rate and blood pressure, feeling tense, irritable, tired, or depressed
- lack of interest, inability to concentrate, racing thoughts, and excessive worry
- avoidance behaviors, such as drinking, smoking, or drug use

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**Turn the negative into the positive.**

Thoughts can affect our stress levels. If we perceive things to be stressful, they are! Practice “thought stopping.” First, notice your thoughts. Are they positive and helpful or negative and unhelpful? Next, use a trigger word to stop a negative and unhelpful thought. Last, replace it with a more helpful thought! Here is an example:

1. You think to yourself, “I am a terrible teacher.”
2. Use a trigger word, like “Stop!”
3. Replace with, “I need to find some new strategies for involving children in cleanup.”

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**Get enough sleep.**

Sleep combats stress by giving our bodies and brains a much-needed break. Experts recommend adults get seven to nine hours of sleep per night. If you need more rest time, try turning off the computer and television a few hours before bedtime, cut back on caffeine in the afternoon, set a regular bedtime, write a worry list and put it aside, and keep your bedroom a place for sleeping, not working.

**Ask for help if you need it.** If your stress is chronic and you feel overwhelmed or depressed, seek professional help. First, see your family physician to rule out any medical problem. Then consider seeing a specialist who can help you cope with these feelings.

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