

The work-life balance basics: 10 stress-busting tips for teachers

Former teacher **Chris Hunt** suggests some steps for taking control of your teaching workload

So you've just got home; you have to collect the kids from their nursery, cook tea, clear up and then start your marking. Then the preparation for the next day starts. You put your children to bed; one of them is in tears because she is being bullied at school. The other one has just landed a principal role in the school production. Neither of them wanted to tell you earlier because you looked so busy and they knew you had so much to do. You get finished by 9.30pm then you shower and get ready for the next day. It's now 10pm. But then there's that report your headteacher has said: "Can you please complete this by tomorrow?"

Sound familiar? All adults are prone to guilt; in [teaching](#), it's the main thing that stops you from having a [work-life balance](#). Everyone else is either coping at school, or expected to cope. It's hard telling your line manager that you didn't have the time to finish a PowerPoint for a meeting because you didn't have the time, so you struggle to do it in your break or at lunch, or even while you are in front of a class. Your work suffers because you don't seem to have the time to do the things you want to do at work. Your life at home suffers because you keep on doing the things you think you should have done at work.

When I was a teacher, there would be countless times when my wife would go out with the rest of the family or friends because I didn't have the time, this continued for years. I was a people-pleaser at work, but not at home. I just thought my wife would understand, which she did. God knows how she put up with it.

As you rise up the ranks in teaching, you end up doing unto others what has been done to you. Your line manager shows you a graph; one of the departments you manage has poor results, so you ask this department what they are going to do about it. Where's the development plan, how will you get your students to convert the Ds to Cs and so on. You say to the head of department: "Can you please complete this by tomorrow?" The plan is submitted to you. You pass on the fact that you have a plan from the department. And the whole sorry cycle carries on.

So as teachers how do you achieve a better work-life balance? Here are my top 10 tips:

1. Sort out your priorities. Make a list of the things that are important to you and decide when you are going to give them some time. This is not just a work list: your family life, your interests are all part of your priorities. This will help you to decide if it is more important to take your children to the cinema, or prepare a lesson in more detail because you are being monitored.

2. Tell people firmly and politely that you won't have time or be able to do something at work. This could be your head of department, or it could even be your class. Both of them will respect you for telling the truth. Headteachers are not impressed by someone who just says "yes" all the time, they are just grateful that someone is willing to do extra work. Saying no to something can be hard but if you know you are going to have to say no then practise what you will say beforehand and

stick to your guns. The first time you do it will be the hardest and you can always offer to help out on another occasion.

3. Put aside some time every week where you can just be yourself. You don't have to do something active like go out for a run, (although that's good to get the endorphins working which help to make you feel good.) You might like to meditate, read a book for an hour or simply just sit and stare.

4. Remember, you may enjoy it but school is work. It's great to enjoy your job, which means that at first you won't resent all the extra time you put into it. But if you keep on putting that extra effort in, you will start to resent it, and so will the people around you. Also if you put in lots of extra effort and don't put anything back into you then that is when you are at risk of burning out. Your brain is like a bank; withdraw too much from it without making the odd deposit and you will feel a deficit. Your body will tell you you are stressed.

5. Swap your self-defeating internal script for a more positive one. You might say to yourself: "If I don't get this marking done, I won't be able to see my friends this weekend." Instead you could say: "I'll just finish this marking and then I'll contact my friends." Also if you have negative voices around you, take yourself away from them. People love to moan and sometimes we all need to let off steam but don't surround yourself with the perpetual moaners in the staffroom; they will bring you down.

6. Live in the present moment, not the future. Anxiety about the future is one of the chief causes of stress. We can all spend hours worrying about what ifs; better to focus on the things you know are real and true not ones you can not determine or influence.

7. Talk to people you trust about a particular situation or issue you are concerned with. There is almost always someone at work, it may be a teacher from another department, who will listen and give you some time, and will be on your side. Talking therapies are great if you can talk to the right sort of person. Often you don't need advice, just someone to listen to you. However, beware the victim mindset: see tip 8.

8. Step out of the victim mindset: it's your responsibility to live your life and how you work as a teacher. Decide what your choices are; people who see themselves as victims think they have no choices. Everyone always has choices, however dire the situation may appear to be in your school at that time. The first thing you need to do to get out of the victim mindset is to change your thinking from: "It's really unfair and I don't have the time," to, "What are my choices here?". It's often as simple as that to make yourself feel better about things. You have taken a positive step and that will be the first one of many.

9. Don't sweat about the small stuff. If the borders on your display are crooked – well so what? They won't actually stop the children from learning. Time is precious in teaching so make use of all the resources and tools that you have available to you. Share plans and resources, use stickers and stamps and make being in class as much fun as you can. Remember why you wanted to teach in the first place. Think back to your successes and the pupils you have had an impact on.

10. Steer clear of staffroom politics and gossip. It wastes time and is often negative and unproductive. Be your own judge of character.

Chris Hunt taught for 33 years in four different [schools](#), in roles ranging from head of department to assistant headteacher. Chris is a life-coach and psychotherapist with a special interest in what

motivates or demotivates people in the workplace. He has spent the last three years building a new business based on enabling people to manage their emotions via an [online system](#) and also runs the website [Stress In Teaching](#) and has written a book on the subject.

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