

Less stress - more success!

Lisa Sonter



Lisa Sonter is an early childhood teacher with many years experience in a variety of early childhood settings. Lisa offers educators practical strategies, information and support in order to enhance learning environments which empower teachers and children. She is a recipient of Community Merit Awards (National Excellence in Teaching Awards) for Leadership and Innovation in Early Childhood Teaching Methods.

As we are very aware, different things cause stress in different people. Everyone reacts to stresses differently at different times, and what relieves stress for one may cause it in another! I have tried to include a variety of different authors and ideas, so, like the proverbial box of chocolates, this paper may offer up some favourite ideas, and perhaps some less preferred options.

Carl Honoré, in his book *In praise of slow*, (2004) shares how he came across an article in a newspaper while waiting for a flight which transformed his thinking! It read *The one minute bedtime story*. To help parents deal with time-consuming tots, authors had condensed classic fairy tales into sixty second sound bites. On reading this, his first impulse was to shout eureka! At story time with his son each night, he would invariably lead him toward the shortest and read them quickly, accelerating the bed time ritual while his son would shout "you're reading too quickly" or "I want another one". He describes how part of him felt terribly selfish but another part simply couldn't resist the urge to hurry on to the next thing on the agenda; pay bills, watch the news, more work. At first glance, *The one minute bedtime story* series seemed too good to be true! As he begun to wonder how quickly Amazon could ship the whole set, he talks about redemption coming in the shape of a counter question: have I gone completely insane? He considered how he had become a scrooge with a stop watch, obsessed with saving every last scrap of time, a minute here, a few seconds there. And he realised he was not alone. Everyone around him: friends, family, colleagues, were caught in the same vortex. (Honoré 2004, p. 2-3)

Recognize the feeling?

Robert Pirsig (1974), in his classic novel *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* talks about the hurriedness of life and suggests that hurrying something means we no longer care about it and want to get on to other things. Waterhouse (2001) wonders why we are all so busy. Where are we so busy getting to: a trip to a stress-free destination or holiday? She explains that would be worth rushing for, but challenges that most of us are busy going nowhere. She offers the following advice:

Happiness doesn't just happen: we need to make it happen.

You can't be happy all the time, but you can be a little happy most of the time. Outsmart your fatigue with fun: do something that makes you smile, giggle or sigh with contentment.

Take one day off! Remember Sundays before the shops were all open? Try to use one part of the weekend for relaxing, for going and thinking slow.

Envisage a sign that reads 'Rest area two hours ahead.' If you can't slow down when you need to, give yourself something on the horizon to look forward to. (Waterhouse 2001)

Waterhouse suggests we take up the mantra: Life in progress, slow down. She discusses eight types of natural energy sources:

- caloric energy (food)
- hydraulic energy (water)
- physical energy
- natural energy (nature)
- restorative energy (sleep)
- sensual energy (connectedness)
- comic energy
- balanced stress: calming chaotic energy.

She argues that we need to listen to our bodies and try and seek balance in these areas.



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Your fatigue is not telling you that you are not good enough, organized enough, productive enough, or disciplined enough. But it may be telling you that you aren't eating enough, drinking enough, moving enough, sleeping enough, socializing enough, laughing enough, or relaxing enough. (Waterhouse 2001, p. 236)

George Bernard Shaw's 'life wasn't meant to be easy' quote (made infamous by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser), comes to mind. Peck (1997) challenges us to consider that the biggest lie promoted by various of our social institutions ... is that we're here to be happy all the time. We're bombarded by business, the media, and the church with the lie that we're here to be happy, fulfilled, and comfortable ... How wicked! The truth is that our finest moments, more often than not, occur precisely when we are uncomfortable, when we're not feeling happy and fulfilled, when we're struggling and searching.

Kagge (2005) challenges us to look or search for solutions or answers in the right place: even if it's hard to do. He explains that it is often easier to blame circumstances rather than spend uncomfortable time teasing apart problems or stressors. However, taking this time to reflect and challenge our assumptions may enable us to see new possibilities and shift the pendulum from disempowerment to empowerment, for both ourselves and the children in our care (Ebbeck & Waniganayake 2003).

My personal observations, readings, reflections and struggles have led me to use and develop the following strategies which may help minimize stress more successfully!

Look for balance:

- Hold realistic expectations: every year is different.
- Accept that when you feel tired, you probably are tired. Some days we can achieve the seemingly impossible, other days we may struggle to walk in the door.
- Let go: ask yourself: what are you trying to promote/extend? What is really important? Choose your battles.
- Remember the KISS principle: Keep it simple sweetheart! What are you trying to achieve in a day: is it too much? Often a simple idea/activity is the most special and meaningful.
- Consider what is a productive day: a busy day or a day when you are achieving a goal? Christine Kane suggests that we understand that some

days may be smiggle days: days set aside to clean out the 'junk drawer', enabling you to focus on what you want to achieve next. Don't forget big picture goals: not getting caught up in day-to-day busy-ness without a plan of action.

Slow down:

- Allow time for relaxing and rejuvenating during the day. Consider pack up time. Perhaps call the group together several times during this activity to take some gentle calming breaths. Perhaps one adult could tidy with a small group of children while others are relaxing, then move on.
- Teach children how to breathe deeply and calmly for relaxation. A variety of yoga type postures and strategies can be used with young children effectively. Consider teaching these to parents as well.
- Take time to stretch: sitting, standing and lying.
- Visualising can be a very effective stress management tool. When implementing this with children, I explain to them that we are going to take a photo inside our head of what we are going to do (e.g. at pack up time, we take a 'photo' of what the room will look like before we commence, and on completion). Calling images for children to visualize during rest time or language time can assist the development of this great imaginative skill.
- Perhaps use a candle at story time or rest time to signal a quiet time.
- Take time to recharge. Try for at least one or two minutes to sit and model stillness and reflection. We try to sit quietly in the room at the beginning of rest time, just being there, with gentle music playing. I have found that children often relax more when they see the adults modeling this behaviour and taking time to relax as well.

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