

Teacher Fears

It is normal and rational to have fears, concerns, or questions about your teaching. Your inexperience, your experiences, and your professionalism all contribute to this: Having high standards for yourself and your work can cause you to worry.

What follows are comments made by and advice from teachers, given to teachers. The first lists fears about their own preparedness.

Being asked difficult questions which I think I cannot answer.

Being discovered unprepared for the class.

...maybe even just that I lose my train of thought and there's just silence for a couple of minutes.

I was asked by a student for the answer to a question I had brought up. I suddenly did not know the answer and was unable to respond during the class.

(depts.washington)

Next, a veteran teacher describes the feelings they had about going to class and how they dealt with them.

However, as the years passed and I became more and more tired and unhappy, I realized that I was becoming afraid of walking into the classroom.

My fear was the result of trauma. Regardless of how many terrific students I had, I was confused by the students who cheated, spoke to me rudely, or refused to engage. I'd had difficult students before, but I'd had more time and energy to break through their defenses. Now, I was taking negative attitudes personally, and I was hurt. I shut down, put up walls, and held all my students at arm's length, to avoid feeling victimized.

My fears were threefold:

Fear of being disliked. In the past, most students had liked me. I was young; I was good-looking "for a teacher;" I really cared about them and their success. In most of my teaching jobs, I wasn't responsible for grading or disciplining students; I'd rarely been obliged to say "no." All this had changed.

Fear of confrontation. In life, as in the classroom, I detest fights. Aggression and displays of anger upset me deeply. When I'm angry, I become icy cold. When faced with inappropriate behavior – whether in a student or a friend – I tend to ignore it, at least outwardly, although I can stew about it for years. I was afraid of confronting students who behaved inappropriately; I froze them out and ignored them, and this made things worse.

Fear of doing a bad job. My sense of identity was now tied to being a “good teacher.” However, my definition of “good teacher” wasn’t accurate. Until now, I’d rarely considered how much my students were learning – instead, I was concerned about whether they were enjoying themselves, and me. I was afraid that if my students didn’t all love me, I wasn’t good at my job. But of course, this isn’t true. My job is to help them learn, not to win their approval.

Identifying these fears was a major step in recovering from my burnout. As I unpacked them, I realized that I needed to change my conception of “good teaching,” I needed to confront classroom difficulties head-on, and I needed to let go of the fantasy that I’d one day walk into the classroom with total confidence that everything would go well.

Fear is a part of any important work. We don’t need to get over it, but we may need to change our approach to it. In my next post, I’ll discuss one way I tried to deal with my fears: I got more training.

(siobhancurious)

This section discusses many common teaching fears and gives constructive advice on how to view them. While we at the community college don’t often deal with parents, they do occasionally show up and we need to know how to talk to them.

One: What If I'm Not Ready?

If you ever find yourself doubting your own credentials, just think back to the veritable mountain of assignments, projects, and theses you had to complete in order to get where you are today. You're never going to feel 100% prepared, so trust your instincts and training and you'll do just fine.

Fortunately, this is also the first fear to be conquered. As your level of experience in the classroom continues to increase, so too will your worries diminish. Better yet, you're only going to get better as time passes. Experience is indeed the best teacher, and every single day you'll learn something new that will make you a better educator.

Two: What If I Make a Mistake?

Although to err is human, your students may not always see it that way. Unruly students are constantly looking for ways to undermine your authority and will jump on any chance to point out your faults.

Internally, remind yourself that everyone makes mistakes. Nobody's perfect and even the best teachers misspell a word or temporarily forget a mathematical formula. Just because you're not a student, it doesn't mean you can't keep learning. If you notice that any particular subject is giving you trouble, spend a little time reacquainting yourself with the material to avoid future missteps.

Externally, find a way to take things in stride without letting your students see you sweat. For example, give out small rewards to any students who can find a typo on an assignment. Instead of an embarrassing mistake, it looks like a teaching moment, with your students none the wiser.

Three: What If I Can't Control My Students?

A deep understanding of the academic content is only half the battle when it comes to managing a class of 20 or more students. You'll also need to keep control of your students, and that can mean dealing with unruly and challenging kids.

At times like these, it's a good idea to reach out to more experienced teachers. Ask your coworkers for advice about dealing with rowdy classes. There's also plenty of online support...

Four: What If Parents Give Me Trouble?

As if dealing with students wasn't hard enough, you'll also need to contend with their parents. While the majority of parents are only too happy to cooperate with and support your efforts, you're bound to encounter a troublesome parent. They may be completely uninterested in their child, or they may be too interested (the dreaded 'helicopter parent' is not just a myth.)

When dealing with uncooperative or aggressive parents, it's important to remember that you're on the same side. You both want what's best for the child, even if you don't agree on the best way to go about it. Keep your cool, stay professional, and be patient; giving into your emotions and engaging in an argument will accomplish nothing and could lead to disciplinary action. Remain composed and stand your ground; in time, you will reach a solution.

Five: What If I'm Not Good at Teaching?

Perhaps the most common fear in all professions, not just teaching, is that of inadequacy. Whether you're a professional athlete or career politician, everyone has his or her own moments of doubt.

As with the fear of not being prepared, you need only look back at how much you've already accomplished. Colleges and universities don't just give degrees to anyone, and between your bachelor's and master's degree programs, certification exams, and whatever else you've had to go through, you've more than proved that you're capable of enjoying a long career as an educator.

Don't let one bad day early on in your career scare you off. Everyone goes through a rough patch, but if you keep at it, your persistence will pay off when a compliment from an administrator, a parent, or a student will lead to the acknowledgement that, yes, you are a good teacher!

(study.com 5 fears)

Here are some solid ideas for facing your fears and getting yourself ready to handle your classroom.

First, document any areas in which you have fears or anxieties as a teacher. Try and take a step back from yourself. Move away from your emotions and closer to your truth. For example, you might say you have a fear of trying new activities in class. If you have observed this, see if you can get to the core of what it is that you are afraid of. Is it that you are uncertain that the activity will work? Or, is it that you're not sure what you will do if it doesn't work? Do you feel that you don't have a strategy in place for repairing an activity you perceive as having failed, or that you would be uncomfortable abandoning it and moving on to something else?

In my teacher training I emphasize the importance of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. To begin this process, start by operating at the edge of your comfort zone, rather than in the middle of it. Ask yourself, "What is the worst that could happen?" The answer is probably a temporary silence in which you might feel awkward or embarrassed. It is precisely these moments that we need to take ownership of and deal with proactively. After all, we all make mistakes. It can be encouraging for our students if they see us get back on track with dignity and humor, rather than struggling to hide something that everyone is aware of.

A clear example of this would be when a student asks a grammar question and the teacher is unable to immediately answer it. We all understand the urge to provide the answer immediately and many of us have probably experienced the process of attempting to provide one before realizing that it either isn't an answer or that it may be inaccurate or wrong. The better response would be to say that you are not sure what the answer is or that you don't know the answer but you know where you can find it and you will come back with the answer by a specific time. The key is to follow through, find the answer, and bring it to class, reminding the class of the question and providing the answer. This strategy will earn the trust and respect of students and provide the teacher with more confidence.

Most of the fears a teacher experiences can be overcome provided they are dealt with seriously and calmly. The first step is to articulate what the fear is. This can be done effectively through writing. Here it is important to dig deep and to ask the powerful questions in a systematic way. For example, if you are afraid of being observed, ask yourself, "What is it that I'm afraid of?", "Do I think I'm not good enough?", "Do I worry about being judged?" etc. Articulating one's fears is the first step towards overcoming them. The next step is to provide the counter argument. In this case, the reasons why you are good enough and how being observed can be a positive experience leading to growth and improvement.

One of the pleasures of teaching is that of continuing to find ways to be better. Naturally, one way of doing this is to try new things, and take risks. Over time, what we originally experienced as fears may become opportunities."

(itdi.pro)

This next part is similar but takes a different look at our fears, and also offers some thought questions with a matching exercise.

Last week I sent around a short questionnaire asking fellow teachers about “fear”. A handful of people suggested “fear” wasn’t really the right word. They said “anxiety” is more appropriate. Indeed, the term “anxiety” is often found in the literature in regards to individual learners, learner groups, teachers, and its effect on motivation, learning, and (to a lesser degree) teaching.

I didn’t recall or edit the survey, though. I thought that while most respondents would automatically equate the term with anxiety anyway, sticking with “fear” might prove interesting because it connotes a more objective threat and stronger emotions. Anxiety is typically associated with chronic, lingering dis-ease, while fear – with more immediate, intense, and temporary reactions in specific situations. We have anxiety about something, and a fear of something. But clearly there’s a lot of overlap. Together, anxiety and fear trace a fair bit of territory on the heart-map of the teacher’s identity which, I declare, is a land of emotion...stronger emotion than we might usually acknowledge.

In fact, right now I’d like to acknowledge that while I may not be experiencing extreme fear writing this piece for the iTDi Blog, I’m certainly anxious! What will the readers think? Is my writing okay? Just how disappointing will it be? I hear a voice within, and it’s a fearful voice. It’s saying, “someone’s going to find you out”.

Anyway, let’s get back to the survey. When respondents shared about fears they remember from their early days as teachers, what do you think was front and center? The most common thread running through their accounts was the often intensely fearful “impostor syndrome”:

“I was afraid of students finding out how much I relied on the textbook because I was just learning how to be a teacher, and I did not have any formal training in TESOL...”

“...Screwing up complicated classroom management or a task set up and that someone would realise what an impostor I was...”

“The first time I taught I had butterflies in my stomach, I was afraid of being labeled ‘stupid’, of not knowing something I should know (‘my native language’), of being asked questions and having no answer, of being an impostor...”

Does any of that ring a bell? Or perhaps flap a butterfly wing? The next question asked about fears they encountered as more experienced teachers. The responses here were more varied, as well as much more specific.

1 – *“I fear students get confused about my instructions or writing prompts”*

2 – *“Now and then think I may someday get bored or tired and want to leave the profession”*

3 - *“My fear now is that my students (who pay for English classes) won’t get their money’s worth out of the class”*

4 – *“Now that I am into teacher training I am afraid that I might project my own perceptions of good/bad teaching on my trainees”*

5 – *“I still always get nervous when facing new classes”*

Interestingly, to me these read more like “fears” than the first batch. Do we tend to shift from experiencing a more overarching “anxiety” to having more “focused fears” as we develop? Another thing to note is that many responses in the first question about the early teaching days ignored the prompt to report what they did in the face of the fear they experienced. In contrast, there was much more about facing the fear and responding to the situation in connection with more recent fears. And since I’m a teacher, I’m now going to have you do a little matching task with some of these comments. Match the four responses A-D below with the items 1-5 above. Yes, there’s one without a match! (Answers below)

A – That’s why I always talk to them in regards to specified criteria

B – I get feedback from students about class activities

C – I always try new things and seek further professional development

D – I think it’s a good thing and I try to stay open to new experiences

These comments reflect the resilience and resourcefulness teachers develop over their careers. It’s not that anxiety or fear in the face of problems disappears. Rather, there’s a shift. Expert teachers have been described as “working at the edge of their competence”, thereby maximizing opportunities for both encountering and solving problems. They invite challenges, lean into them, and live the questions that once caused fear. And as they develop they increasingly live out the famous Maya Angelou quote, “Having courage does not mean that we are unafraid. Having courage and showing courage mean we face our fears.”

Respondents to my survey also identified what they thought were common teacher fears. Can you relate to any of these? Take a minute to simply reflectively connect one or more of them to your own experience. These are memories of the past, but what might you take out of this recall and reflection for tomorrow? If there is fear or other negative emotion around it, what could be your first step through it?

“That they may be missing out on something else career-wise”

“A lot of teachers just want their students to like them, but fear they don’t”

“Not feeling respected and appreciated for their hard work”

“Murphy’s Law and technology – constantly on edge: will it work?!?”

Finally, some of the additional prompts teachers offered for reflection on teacher’s fear and anxiety:

“The impact of fear is on teacher’s professional development choices. Does it spark a bigger desire to learn or does it paralyze the teacher? Sort of like what happens with anxiety, which can be positive if it is not overwhelming”

“I really enjoy being in the class and feel comfortable 99% of the time, but I am busy and I have been worried about exhaustion and burnout”

“Do teachers feel that their English proficiency causes them fear as well?”

“Teachers need to know they do not know everything. Putting our defences down is a great way to open our hearts and learn from students”

... what is very clear to me is this: the negative side of fear thrives in isolation. Dan Lortie called teaching “the egg-carton profession” because we may work in close proximity to our peers but too rarely connect and collaborate in important ways. As one of my respondents commented, “Schools should have an open door policy and teachers should walk in and out of each other’s teaching rooms!”. Now that’s unafraid! And it’s beautiful. It’s also, unfortunately, unrealistic. So while we keep working to break down the more physical walls, we should use the connective vessel of the internet to share thoughts, experiences, and especially emotions with colleagues through social media and teacher networks like iTDi. This is one powerful way for teachers to beat fear and be free.

Matching task answers: 4 – A, 1 – B, 2 – C, 5 – D.

(itdi.pro fear factor)

And finally, more advice on dealing with your fears of anything, not just teaching, as well as tips for self-care.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #1: Kill Worry By Accepting the Worst and Working to Improve It

The best technique for dealing with anxiety comes from Dale Carnegie’s [How to Stop Worrying and Start Living](#). Carnegie interviewed Willis H. Carrier, the engineer and founder of the Carrier Corporation, the company many of us use for our air conditioning system. Early in his career, Carrier had made a mistake and installed a massive air handling system that didn’t work. After nights of not sleeping, Carrier adopted three steps that changed his life.

Analyze the situation fearlessly and honestly and figure out the worst that can happen as a result.

Accept the worst outcome

Calmly devote time and energy to improve upon the worst which has already been accepted mentally.

When I'm worried, I grab pen and paper and start by listing the worst thing that can happen. I go ahead and accept the worst, and then, I start improving it. ...

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #2: Interrupt Negative Thought Loops and Replace Them With Positive Ones

Your thoughts can swirl into a tornado — taking you to places of purpose or pathetic places of self-induced agony.

Your thoughts create a mental momentum that spills over into your physical world.

On a recent episode of *Every Classroom Matters*, Sir John Hargrave, author of *Mindhacking*, talked about “thought loops.” Thought loops are those repeated loops of things we say to ourselves. Part of self-awareness and metacognition is the ability to pull back and observe your thoughts from a distance.

Gandhi said, “I will not let anyone walk through my mind with his dirty feet.”

Sometimes we're the one with dirty feet and the negativity comes from ourselves. Sometimes our thoughts echo negative things people have said to us that we won't let go. We can master our thoughts and redirect our abilities. Interrupt your negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. Even if you have to talk to yourself. Redirect your thoughts and regain your mind.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #3: Keep a Joy Journal

Looking for joy is like looking for a color. When you look for the color blue, you see it everywhere. Start noticing and writing down things that bring you joy. You'll re-set your mindset and become happier.

Research has shown that keeping a joy journal will improve your “long term well being” more than winning a million dollars in the lottery.

Most of us are naturally tuned to notice certain things. Some people always see the negative, like old Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*. ...

Some of us just need to re-set our mindset. Listing five things a day will have you looking for those things. The kind word, the fun time you had playing with the dog, the romantic dinner you had last night, the surprise phone call from an old friend. We all have moments of joy if we start noticing them instead of feeling blue.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #4: Make Sleep a Priority

A tired teacher is a powderkeg looking for a match. Set an evening alarm to remind yourself that it is time to go to sleep. Sleep loss makes it harder to think, harms your health and worsens your mood. Women who sleep less than seven hours a night are more likely to be obese. Norbert

Schwarz says, “Making \$60,000 more in annual income has less of an effect on your daily happiness than getting one extra hour of sleep a night.”

Brooks and Lack found that a ten-minute nap was ideal, but that even a five-minute snooze was better than nothing.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #5: Drink Enough Water

Take time to drink water. Seventy-five percent of Americans suffer from chronic dehydration. Dehydration is shown to impact your mood and cognitive processes negatively. The effects of dehydration are real and especially detrimental to teachers who must stay positive and think clearly.

Many suffer not from lack of water, but an inability to take time to drink it. Apply the “mud puddle principle” and put a glass by each sink in your home. Drink a whole glass of water at the beginning of break and lunch. Drinking water must become part of your habits, so you do it automatically.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #6: Exercise (preferably outside)

Sitting is the new cigarette. Every 90 minutes a human needs to move. We’re not stuck on a ship, after all, we can walk around the building or visit a friend across campus. Some of us can even walk to work.

Just five minutes of exercise gives you a positive mood-enhancing impact. Exercising outdoors will boost your mood even more.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #7: Make Time for Faith

A strong correlation exists between religion and positive mental health. Research-proven ways of handling stress include meditation, deep breathing, aromatherapy, listening to music, visualization and prayer. ...

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #8: Develop deep relationships

As humans, we need intimacy. But just being together is not enough. Be careful that your stressful career doesn’t ruin your close relationships. While journaling your problems is shown to reduce stress, just talking about them with another person is not. And cynical gossip has an intensely negative impact on your life.

Build healthy relationships of mutual respect and common interests. Do fun things together. Take time off from work-worries and just be a human being, not a human doing.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #9: Make Physical Affection Part of Your Day

Kissing, hugging, and even massages are proven ways to reduce stress. Even a simple, appropriate hug or pat on the back can help.

Teacher Stress Busting Secret #10: Unplug, Recharge, and Focus

A distracted captain can run his ship aground. A distracted person is a danger to himself and those he cares for most.

Constant interruptions can make you feel like a human doing and not a human being.

Unplug. First, we need at least an hour before bed when we are not looking at or around our brightly lit devices. Technology devices wake us up and interrupt our circadian rhythms, making it difficult to sleep. Stop using technology one hour before bedtime.

Recharge. Charge your phone outside of the bedroom. Even in airplane mode and do not disturb, some apps can wake us up.

Have a Do Not Disturb Time. You need uninterrupted moments of DND (Do Not Disturb) time. Any time you're at an event and want to focus on the event, set your phone to DND, particularly if using your phone as the camera. This way, you won't be interrupted with an "urgent" email when you go to snap a picture of a never-to-be-repeated moment. You will also be more productive at work. Teachers who mess around with computer instead of focusing on students, make a mess of great teaching opportunities.

Teaching: An Epic Quest for Excellence

It would be nice to calm the storm and sail quiet seas all the time. But some of the most hated weather by sailors is dead calm. You have nothing to propel you forward — no wind. When you teach, you have to accept the weather we navigate. What you do not have to accept is that you have to stress out about it and have no quality of life.

(coolcatteacher)

There is a lot of good advice here! It is very easy to neglect ourselves in order to be the "best teacher we can be." However, if we are not feeling well and healthy, we can't expect to do our best in the classroom day after day. Our careers are long-term, so our self-care and positive attitudes need to reflect that.