

Four Strategies to Cultivate Greater Well-Being through Need Satisfaction

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Many teachers new to the profession often describe their teaching duties as pushing them to their physical and emotional limits. Some of the new life adjustments that come with starting a teaching career include following school protocol, preparing lesson plans and materials, observations and evaluations by senior staff, and our main herculean task – connecting with, guiding, teaching, listening to, and being personal counselors for six, seven or more groups made up of 30 to 40 diverse personalities. Teaching is a job we may well feel fits this wry observation from an anonymous wit, “Good teachers are the ones who can challenge young minds without losing their own.” In the face of these numerous challenges, how can we teachers stay motivated and feel positive about our daily work? I would like to discuss four self-help strategies that new teachers may find useful in helping them more rapidly bridge the gap from that of the bewildered, exhausted, and coffee-addicted newcomer, to that of the calm, relaxed, and cheery veteran.

Teaching and Self-Determination Theory

The teaching profession regularly takes the gold medal on the list of occupations which threaten early retirement. For example, in the United States, Edutopia, the Educational Foundation founded by George Lucas, informs us that within five years of starting employment at schools, nearly half of new teachers decide to leave the profession. Reasons include frustrations and disappointments with students, teaching freedom inhibited by administration, and excessive contact time leading to emotional exhaustion, among others. In particular, it is not uncommon for new teachers to feel quite de-motivated and rundown. The thought that surely there must be an easier life starts to erode away the initial determination and energy to become a teacher. Thoughts that a teaching career might not be the best fit for us become less and less easy to dismiss. However, teachers take heart! Research, emerging from studies investigating Self Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 1985), a theory developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the Clinical and Social Sciences Department at the University of Rochester, has come to show well-being, growth and the ability to persevere when faced with trials in life are strongly linked to how our environment supports us in positively satisfying psychological needs. In SDT, our three basic psychological needs are identified as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy means being in control of one’s own decisions and having choice (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Competence is the feeling we are having an effect on our surroundings. Relatedness is the feeling of belonging to and having connections with a social group, such as family or social circles of friends, and, indeed, our learners.

SDT research also suggests that the extent to which our motives in taking action are authentic (in other words, how connected and related they are to our innermost goals and beliefs) impacts on our perceptions of well-being, satisfaction with both our social lives and work life, and success in the building of sound and healthy relationships with others. Goals, behavior and desires which are in harmony with our own beliefs can have a positive effect on our health, both on a mental and physical level (for more, see a fuller discussion of goals and well-being in Sheldon et al., 2004).

What does all the hard work from the SDT researchers mean for us? Well, if teachers are able to experience their work in a more deeply and fulfilling manner, they will probably also become more able to cope successfully with, and enjoy, their daily work experiences. But why take pot luck with life bringing you the needed satisfaction you want to be happier and healthier, when you can take matters into your own hands? From the no-nonsense Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations over 2000 years ago comes the shrewd advice, “Thou canst pass thy life in an equable flow of happiness, if thou can go by the right way, and think and act in the right way”. By “thinking and acting in the right way”, and consciously devoting a little time to self-reflective and self-regulatory strategies that help us satisfy our basic needs, we may be able to head off reaching a breaking point, enjoy our work experience more and become more resilient to the many stresses involved with a teaching career. Teacher, heal thyself!

Strategy 1: Feel-Good Feedback

Try to build a collection of positive feedback by keeping the following:

- personal notes of thanks from students

- surveys which evaluate your teaching in a positive manner
- class photos of groups you have taught that have been great teaching experiences
- thank you notes from other teachers

Recalling enjoyment in teaching, and the experience of satisfying relationships with students and student groups, corresponds to the SDT basic need of relatedness in which we strongly experience the attachments between us and others, reinforcing our feelings of pleasant connections with our social group. Train yourself to see the classroom as a place that while having its stresses and disappointments, also promises unique and touching social experiences that you as a teacher (and perhaps only as a teacher!) can have.

Strategy 2: Reflect on the difference you can make.

As a teacher, take a moment to reflect on why students are in your class, and correspondingly the positive influence your class could have on their future. Reflect on the value your teaching has had in the past, while visualizing the potential gain for your students using the skills you are teaching them now, or will be teaching them soon. One personal moment of satisfaction came when, by chance, on the train going to work one morning, I met a student I had taught a few years previously. This student had just returned from a six-month study abroad program and when he saw me, he excitedly explained how my classes had helped him in having a very positive experience during his time studying overseas. While, in fact, I had difficulty in recalling this individual student, I experienced a real and gratifying warm glow of usefulness to another person. These experiences will happen to you, and the importance of reflecting on our professional competence, and on the positive way we can affect our students' future is crucial in giving our work deeper and more personal significance.

Strategy 3: Keep your mind in the moment.

We have all experienced times of staggering into the staffroom, grabbing a cup of coffee and collapsing in our chair while an internal voice whispers, "was that really only the end of the first class today?" or as the day draws to a close "just one more to go". While this is a situation every healthy teacher occasionally finds themselves in, if you find yourself sinking into this bog of depression, lethargy and desperation every day, well, you have a problem. Maybe habit is starting to rule your classroom? Are you starting to see classes as reruns? Are individual students starting to become faceless clones that you see for a few months or a year only to be replaced by a new unit?

In SDT discussions, one of the keys often emphasized for well-being is mindfulness. In mindfulness by focusing clearly on what is happening to us right here and right now in the classroom, we become more fully connected to our daily teaching experience and more able to see ourselves, and our actions, clearly and critically. By seeing yourself more clearly and realistically you are able to identify goals more connected to your authentic desires and hopes, and more able to take perceptive action to improve your shortcomings as a teacher. By acting as your own coach and mentor you can help yourself to lift your performance. Mindfulness also means we are more open to the novel and interesting aspects of what is going on around us, and is described by Chatzisarantis and Hagger (2007) as being a "quality of consciousness that is characterized by clarity and vividness of current experience and functioning" (p. 665). Make sure you are not zoning out in class, but are alive to the present demands of your class and its mood, making necessary changes in actions and approach, and practicing alert and sensible class micro-management. Along with keeping an eye on ourselves and our behavior as much as possible, remind yourself that every student you meet is a unique individual that deserves your full attention. Good ones need you to challenge them, less motivated ones need to be guided towards personal goals, and disruptive ones need to be brought into the group as constructive members.

Strategy 4: Envision a future self.

Future selves are one of the current hot topics being examined in motivational psychology by leading researchers in the field, like Zoltán Dörnyei, however we teachers should get in on the act too. As a career educator, can you clearly visualize what you want to have done, who you will become, what challenges you will have overcome five or ten years from now? Be careful here, remember that in line with the ideas of SDT we want to make sure our goals reflect our own deeply-held beliefs and interests as closely as possible, rather than what we think other people may be expecting of us. Following through on, and achieving goals will strengthen your feeling of competence and help make you a more resilient and satisfied individual.

It's Worth the Effort

Especially at the beginning of our careers, teachers face considerable demands on our physical and emotional limits in coming to terms with the challenges and stresses involved in teaching. Studies by Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) explained in her book, *The How of Happiness*, show that a large percentage of our happiness, perhaps up to 40%, is decided by how we think. Finding ways to mentally and emotionally cope with the teaching day, experience deeper satisfaction in career goals, and deal with inevitable classroom crisis and stress are vital aspects of teaching practice. These skills allow us to build and maintain a positive outlook on a job which is very demanding, and to enjoy a long and rewarding career as an educator.

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