Staff wellbeing and Self-efficacy

An individual's beliefs can act as a key protective factor against the negative effects of stress.

Most people believe that 'stress' is a bad thing and will lead to an early grave. To some extent, this true, but it is not the whole story. Recent research has suggested that if an individual experiences stress, and they believe stress to be harmful ('it will cause heart disease'), they are more likely to develop health problems (e.g. heart attack). However, if an individual experiences stress, and they believe stress is helpful ('It's preparing me and providing me with the energy and alertness I need'), they are less likely to develop health problems. Therefore, the research findings suggest that it's not the stress that kills you, but the *belief* that stress will kill you, that kills you.

The current explanation for this relates to the body's physiological response to stress. The body's response to stress is thought to be very similar to when a person experiences excitement, courage or bravery (e.g. adrenaline , cortisol, heart rate increases, etc). One key difference that has been identified between those that believe stress is harmful and those that believe it is helpful, is how the blood vessels respond. For those believing it to be harmful, the blood vessels are said to constrict, reducing blood flow and increasing blood pressure. For those believing it to be helpful, the vessels relax, allowing blood to flow freely throughout the body.

A large body of research has identified self-efficacy as a key protective factor against teacher burnout.

Self-efficacy refers to "*an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments*" (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, teacher self-efficacy is the extent to which a teacher believes that they have the capacity to influence the achievement of their goals. The 'goal' could be something small and immediate, such as remembering to use 'specific praise' when the child finishes their task, or something more long-term, such as ensuring all the children in the class are able to understand and follow the classroom rules.

A person's judgements of self-efficacy are thought to be measured along three basic scales:

- **Self-efficacy magnitude** measures the difficulty level (e.g. easy, moderate, and hard) an individual feels is required to perform a certain task. *How difficult is my class work? Are the quizzes easy or hard?*
- **Self-efficacy strength** refers to the amount of conviction an individual has about performing successfully at diverse levels of difficulty. *How confident am I that I can excel at my work tasks? How sure am I that I can climb the ladder of success?*
- **Generality of self-efficacy** refers to the "degree to which the expectation is generalized across situations. *To what extent can the confidence I have in this skill be applied to other situations?*

Self-efficacy is considered both a global and a domain-specific construct.

People are thought to have a general level of self-efficacy (for aspects of their life), but self-efficacy can also be linked to specific areas or tasks. Here are some examples:

- Academic self-efficacy (general & specific subjects)
- Social self-efficacy (making friends, presentations)
- Physical self-efficacy (sports)
- Creative self-efficacy (art, music)
- Parenting self-efficacy
- Teaching self-efficacy

Why is self-efficacy important?

"the beliefs (call them cognitions, if you like) that individuals create and develop and hold to be true about themselves form the very foundation of human agency and are vital forces in their success or failure in all endeavours… how people behave can often be better predicted by their beliefs about their capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing" (Pajares, 2002)

- Teachers with higher self-efficacy are *less* likely to;
  - quit.
  - experience psychological health issues and stress.
  - experience physical health issues.
  - be at risk of burnout.
- Teachers with higher self-efficacy are *more* likely to;
  - be motivated, productive and confident in their practice
  - experience greater job satisfaction.
  - motivate their students.
  - produce better academic outcomes for their students.
- Self-efficacy shapes how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave - A person will only have the incentive to try if they believe they can succeed.
- "People need to learn how to manage failure so it's informational and not demoralising" (Bandura). Failure has been found to stimulate greater cognitive activity (thinking and processing) in people with high self-efficacy than those with lower self-efficacy. Edison once said, "*I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention with 1,000 steps.*"
- Self-efficacy effects the goals we choose. Low self-efficacy; more likely to set lower goals .
- Self-efficacy impacts learning as well as effort. High self-efficacy; more likely to seek challenge and work harder to learn a new task.
- Self-efficacy will influence the persistence for which a person will attempt to learn a new and difficult task. Employees who are high in self-efficacy are thought to be more confident and therefore will persist in their efforts when learning a new task even when encountering a problem.
- Linked to higher academic achievement
- More likely to engage in behaviours that increase chance of success
- Linked to better health outcomes

- Linked to higher levels of productivity
- Linked to internal locus of control attributions (attribute success and failure to their actions, not external factors)

According to Bandura (1997), an individual's level of efficacy (low/high) interact with the responsiveness of the environment (responsive/unresponsive) to produce the following four predictive variables:

High + Responsive - A person with a high level of self-efficacy in a responsive environment will be successful. Their positive attitude toward their abilities coupled with environmental change promotes success and improves long-term motivation.

Low + Responsive - A person with a low level of self-efficacy in a responsive environment may become reliant on external factors (e.g. others) to help. They believe the environment will change but their lack of belief in their own abilities reduces their motivation to act.

Low + Unresponsive - A person with low self-efficacy and an unresponsive environment is more likely to feel helpless and believe all efforts are pointless, thus causing them to be completely inactive.

High + Unresponsive - A person with high self-efficacy in an unresponsive environment will either increase their efforts toward change or decide they need to change their approach or goals.

Indications of high/low self-efficacy

- Choices – willing to give it a go vs. avoid difficulty/unfamiliar (fear of failure).
- Motivation – puts effort into tasks vs. little or no effort.
- Perseverance – keeps going, despite obstacles vs. gives up quickly
- Perception of mistakes – perceives mistakes as informative vs. demoralising.
- Thinking style – changeable mindset vs. fixed mindset.
- World view – Internal (I can influence what happens) vs external (something else dictates the result) locus of control.
- Task orientation – process (how?) vs goal (outcome?) oriented.
- Mood – optimism vs. worried/pessimism

Self-efficacy is influenced by four key factors

- Mastery experience (experience of success and failure – *this is the most influential factor*)
- Social persuasion (feedback from others, such as praise or criticism)
- Physiological state (body sensations, such as heart rate)
- Vicarious experience (observing others & comparing self to others)

How to influence the four sources of self-efficacy:

Mastery (experiencing achievement)

- Opportunities for success/achievement
- Develop the skills/knowledge required to achieve the goal (e.g. planning skills, self-regulation)
- Ensure the task matches the person's current skill level.
- Engage in an appropriate level of challenge (not so difficult it's impossible, not too easy it requires little thought or effort).
- Gradually increase difficulty of task, as skills & belief develop (challenging but not overwhelming)
- Learn how to do something better – practise.
- Time to reflect on what you did well & what you would do differently next time
- Ask for help
- Take risks ,and learn from them – behavioural experiments
- Engage in behaviours that will increase chance of success
- Identify goals and steps to achieve them.
- Reflect on the progress you have made.
- Provide greater autonomy (greater choice/flexibility)

Social Persuasion (praise & criticism)

- Give encouragement
- Identify strengths
- Reward actions/behaviours/choices that will help them in the future.
- Praise specific efforts, skills, strategies and processes.
- Correct 'I can't do it' with 'I can't do it..*yet*'
- Encourage reflection on what has helped to solve problems/tasks in the past and in other situations.
- Regular opportunities to identify, praise and be grateful for each other's strengths, efforts and achievements

Physiological state (body sensations)

- Gradually stretch comfort zone, when ready.
- Develop plans to prevent and reduce stress when it happens.
- Plan in regular opportunities to help maintain stress levels (e.g. diet, exercise, meditation)
- Learn responsive strategies for stress (breathing, progressive muscle relaxation)
- Challenge thoughts – *How true is it?, Am I catastrophizing? Where's the evidence? Is that thought helpful? "Stress is helping by telling me there is a problem and giving me the energy I need to deal with it"*
- Mindfulness – *it's one shot of your movie. It will pass.*
- Gratitude diary
- Food – Glucose
- Rest
- Have fun
- Distraction

Vicarious experience (observing others and comparing self to others)

- Observe and learn from others
- Observe others and offer guidance
- Teach, advise and support others
- Work with colleagues where possible
- Talk to others about experiences
- Observe others that are similar to you
- Avoid comparing yourself to those more experienced and skilled than you, unless it's to help you identify what you need to work on.

Suggested further reading:

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.

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- Schwarzer, R., & Hallum, S. (2008). Perceived teacher self-efficacy as a predictor of job stress and burnout: Mediation analyses. *Applied Psychology*, *57*(s1), 152-171.

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- Yildirim, K. (2015). Testing the main determinants of teachers' professional well-being by using a mixed method. *Teacher Development*, *19*(1), 59-78.