

TEC Podcast #4 “Optimizing Special Educator Wellness and Job Performance Through Stress Management,” by Brandi Ansley, David Houchins, and Kris Varjas, *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 48(4), pp. 176–185.

Lorraine: Welcome to this *TEACHING Exceptional Children* podcast. I'm Lorraine Sobson, Publications Manager for the Council for Exceptional Children. Today, I'm speaking with Brandi Ansley, a doctoral student at Georgia State University. She's also the author of a recent article in TEC, entitled “Optimizing Special Educator Wellness and Job Performance Through Stress Management.” Brandi, thanks for joining me!

Brandi: Thank you for having me.

Lorraine: Before we discuss the article itself, I'd like to set the stage by noting that in addition to being a special educator for the past eight years, you have a master's in clinical psychology and you facilitated stress management workshops in a variety of settings. Your article describes an individual perspective on stress management, that it's a personal responsibility regardless of the school environment or setting. Can you tell me a little bit about how your background influenced your path as a special educator and particularly what inspired you to write this article and to develop the Self-directed Stress Management Plan?

Brandi: Yes, okay, so starting with when I did complete my master's in clinical psychology and the work that I did in the mental health field, one of the last roles that I had in relation to mental health and stress management involved teaching job readiness classes to adults with severe and persistent mental health diagnoses. It was to the point where the mental health issues impaired them to the degree that they qualified for disability under the ADA definition. I really enjoyed that, but around the time that I completed my degree and just a combination of factors at that particular time, I was thinking, “Well, it might be really cool to work with kids who are similar, but maybe even work with high schoolers.” At that time, I was able to pretty easily shift from the clinical psychology setting into the education setting. At that point, I was responsible for different courses [such as] occupational education and it involved some components of stress management. I really enjoyed being a teacher.

Over the years, though, it seemed to be where stress started taking more of a toll on me and it seemed like I had almost forgotten what I had learned and practiced and preached to others all those years and even to the point where I'd had some health-related concerns at one time. I knew that even though, yes, there are some factors in the job that are stressful, I knew that I also had to manage my stress. It wound up happening that not long after that I came across this opportunity and I'm in the PhD program that I'm in now and so it all just kind of came together as to where what I did in the past in the clinical psychology field, the stress management workshops in the job readiness setting as well as in cardiac rehab and federal prisons and a variety of settings there, and then everything from both my experience as a teacher and what I taught to

my students as well as what I went through as a teacher and what I observed my colleagues going through as well—just reaching a point of burnout.

Lorraine: You just mentioned that as a teacher you began to develop some concerns about your health and that you realized you needed to manage your stress. We know that stress can have serious health effects and shouldn't be taken for granted as simply part of a special educator's job. Can you explain how stress negatively affects the body?

Brandi: Everybody has stress. It's required in order to respond to the demands of life. Of course, humans are the most complex of all animals and we've experienced stress for as long as we have existed, but stress now is different than it used to be. Stress many, many years ago used to involve mostly physical demands that required what is better known as the "fight-or-flight response"; what that is is your sympathetic nervous system preparing you to either defend yourself like in a survival situation, to be able to run faster. In the case of say things not so extreme as that, stress motivates us to meet deadlines, to help us get focused on the task at hand—but there's also an opposing response to that; the parasympathetic nervous system helps return us back to normal.

Well, with today's stressors, that doesn't happen so easily because, for one thing, in the process of dealing with the stress, we're not necessarily resolving it through any natural outlet. The stressors we have now and [those] specific to the special education setting, like workload, multiple responsibilities, sometimes there's issues of role confusion and being many places at one time, a lot of special education teachers are kind of spread thin among their school with just having to account for various duties. In the process, though, the stress is not necessarily getting resolved. Well, on top of that, the stress is also a common, almost daily experience and so our parasympathetic nervous system does not even have the chance to help us naturally resolve our stress and return us back to normal functioning.

In the presence of stress, we have that alarm reaction and then we work to resist our stress. Our mind and our bodies naturally work to address it, to adapt to it, but over time, we just reach a point of exhaustion. We can't deal with that anymore and so that then leads to things like there could simply be illness from a compromised immune system; there could also be issues of mood changes, more prone to irritability, difficulty focusing and making it harder to stay on top of tasks. Then, also like nervousness, anxiety, just approaching various situations with dread because when you get into a pattern, where stress becomes your new normal, it's something where you tend to have a lot of anticipation of things and then you also tend to have where you're just unable to address the various demands of the special education position.

Lorraine: You just described how stress can interfere with a teacher's job performance and ultimately professional outcomes, I'd assume. Now, can the stress have a trickle-down effect on learning outcomes for students?

Brandi: Definitely—the factors that are related to a teacher's stress can have an impact on a student's learning experience, which can then eventually impact student outcomes. Even though it's very difficult to prove a direct causation, it's a chain of factors that

ultimately bounce off one another and lead to student outcomes. For example, a teacher who has reached such a point of exhaustion that just sleeping the usual amount is not helping anymore or being unable to focus and stay on top of all the responsibilities of the job. First of all, there's going to be difficulty with the instructional delivery because it's hard to do that when you're not focused, but also it's difficult to deal with challenging behaviors when you are prone to irritability.

It's hard to expect [students] to behave appropriately or to develop behaviors that we're not modeling ourselves. Especially when it comes to de-escalation and if you have students who are already prone to getting upset or having triggers that then lead to inappropriate behaviors—well, if they're being led by an adult who is upset and/or prone to irritability..., they feel that and also respond to it. So then, other outcomes—whether it's the academic-based outcomes [such as] how well did a student learn something or how well can they perform and demonstrate that they learned something, or even their behavior related goals—those are all at risk when their learning environment is not conducive and a warm and supportive setting.

Lorraine: Okay, now that the stage is set, let's talk about what our readers and listeners can do to manage stress. What is a Self-directed Stress Management Plan, or SSMP?

Brandi: Basically, it's just an individual's method for managing his or her stress. As far as the name of it, it's *self-directed* because it requires the person who is looking to manage their stress to determine what coping strategies are most effective for them. As someone who's facilitated many stress management workshops, I know that one of the trickiest parts about teaching this to others is that what works for one person doesn't always work for the next. You want to find something that is helpful and that does help to relieve stress. Of course, many things probably come to mind to a reader and listener about what any given person can do to deal with their stress, but not all of those are healthy. You want to find something that does relieve stress, but also does not perpetuate or lead to further stress down the line.

Sometimes it can be a trial-and-error process, just as it could be with students, learning what works, what keeps a person engaged in their own well-being, and what is something that a person will look forward to. If it's a strategy that just becomes dreadful or undesirable, well, then it's not going to be something this person keeps practicing. If they can find outlets to help relieve their stress and then find that it's working and experience the benefits of it, then they will be able to go from there and determine the course of how they want to continue to manage their wellness.

Lorraine: You've just explained that the SSMP is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but it's individualized and the goal is to help understand our stressors and how we can manage our response to them. One thing I really liked about this article was that you emphasize that creating the SSMP is similar to developing a student's IEP or behavior plan, so it should be a familiar process to special educators. Can you elaborate on this?

Brandi: Absolutely, one of my favorite sayings is “there's the / in IEP because it's all about the individual student.” So, as far as how this applies to our work as special educators, we

know that when we're drafting an IEP or even a behavior plan—whether we're formally conducting a functional behavior assessment or if there's some specific process of determining what goes into these forms or if it's based on anecdotal information—either way, the final product, the idea of it is that there are supposed to be strategies there that benefit the student. Then, the goals and the objectives are based on that student improving from where they currently are at that time that the plan is drafted.

How this translates to a Self-directed Stress Management Plan is that the special educator who realizes that they're at a point that their stress needs to be reduced—or even for those who don't necessarily feel that they've reached the level of burnout; these are great even for prevention. In fact, it's even better if these start with prevention, but either way this is where the person would identify their triggers, what are some things they need to be aware of? Sometimes, you have to put more effort into managing stress, sort of like sometimes you have students where on certain days, they're requiring more intense effort than others. Knowing these triggers and then also knowing like an IEP has accommodations that benefit a student—well, as a special educator, you have to know what accommodations and strategies [might] help you.

You want to consider where are you now? At whatever point, special educators, they have to not only look at the strategies, but also look at is this working for them, and they have to be engaged in the process and determine if this is helping them manage their stress or do they perhaps need to make some adjustments. They have to also know that it's okay. Sometimes when things don't work as quickly as we'd like them to or if we find that something we tried just really didn't work very well, people tend to get discouraged and just give up. It's very important to their health that they don't and to make sure that the focus is on improving—not necessarily on being ideal 100% at that time, because this is real life and sometimes we are going to have more stress than others.

Lorraine: In the article, you explain that a “comprehensive” stress management plan is ideal. Can you explain what this is and why it's the best choice?

Brandi: In initiatives to help employees manage stress, whenever studies have been conducted to determine what's been most effective, they're often divided into groups. Of course, there's a control group who was waitlisted and so nothing happened during the study and nothing changed, but there's like one group that was assigned to an exercise intervention and then there'd be another group, where it's more like stress management workshops, similar to what I do sometimes and where you go over problem solving and mindset, the way you think about and approach different stressful situations; and of course even the relaxation strategies. Then, they'll always have a group that does both, where they do exercise and the stress reduction education.

Well, the participant groups that were assigned to any of the stress reduction interventions, basically anyone but the control group, those groups showed improvements in stress. Sometimes, this was measured through physiological measurements such as blood pressure, cortisol, resting heart rate, but this has also of

course been measured through self-report because stress is, in part at least, based on perception. Well, all the groups who have been exposed to an intervention as a group [have shown] improvements on these various measures, but the group that had more than one approach to stress management engaged in different strategies, and, more specifically, strategies that involved addressing physical processes, such as exercise. That's what I mean by comprehensive. Those groups show more improvement over the groups that just did one strategy versus another.

Lorraine: You also in the article mention mindfulness training. What is that and what's the research surrounding it?

Brandi: *Mindfulness training* is basically a series of cognitive exercises. There's different ways that it's carried out. The most common form of mindfulness training is mindfulness-based stress reduction. It's a practice that was initially brought into modern medicine by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late '70s, early '80s, around that time. Then, eventually, it grew in medical and psychological settings. What it involves is paying attention to the present, so the facilitator would have something that the people participating in the training would pay attention to. It could be something such as their breathing, any sound in the environment—I could go on about all the examples—and then what happens is, as you are instructed to pay attention to this otherwise mundane stimulus, your mind is going to wander. Well, then the facilitator redirects the participant to stop and think about what was it, what were your thoughts, what was your focus, and then to process this without judgment and just to accept wherever your mind went and then to redirect your focus back on the targeted stimulus.

That's the training part of it. Mindful practice is a habit of mind. As far as a habit of mind, it's more where those who practice mindfulness tend to not judge a situation as quickly or even if they do (because some things are just human nature), they stop and think more. In studies of mindfulness training, it's actually pretty widespread in clinical settings and especially I'd say in the past five years or so, ... there's been more attention given to mindfulness training in schools. In fact, stress research for educators is mostly looking at relationships and what are some factors that have been shown to be related to teacher stress, but there's relatively few studies that are on interventions and, well, what can we do about it? The research that is aimed at stress reduction for teachers tends to use mindfulness training as the intervention.

Lorraine: Let's double back to relaxation methods. How do they fit into this picture of relieving or responding to stress?

Brandi: With relaxation methods, the point of these—no matter which modality a person selects, the point of these is to activate the parasympathetic nervous system that I described earlier when talking about the natural response to stress and the natural response of our minds and bodies to help return us to normal and to try to maintain that balance. Well, especially if we are exposed to chronic stress and our parasympathetic system is not getting the chance to return us there because it's just over and over and over again, stress is happening, we can help ourselves by engaging in a relaxation technique. Just as stress sends most of your systems up as in elevated blood

pressure, elevated anxiety, nervousness, tension, relaxation sends everything in a decreasing type of direction, like it lowers your rate of respiration. It has been shown in research to help reduce the feeling of tension and perceptions of pain and also calmer mood, less irritability, and even more energy and better ability to sleep, when relaxation training strategies are utilized to help reduce stress.

Lorraine: Well, having a plan like this sounds great, but how can teachers commit to putting an SSMP into action when they're already so busy?

Brandi: That's a great question and it's probably one of the most frequently asked. There's really two answers to this. The first one would be that if we really look at how we use our time, there should be ways to at least find a starting point. I totally understand, for example, why somebody would not have a block of several days to just take off and go to some relaxation retreat. That definitely makes sense to me, but I do challenge everyone to find 10 minutes. Especially if a person is not doing anything to actively manage their stress, if they start with just 10 minutes a day or maybe 20 minutes every other day—I mean there's not really research out there that defines what the dosage of stress management is as far as *how much*: It's based on improvements and are we doing better than we were before?

If we can find points in the day that maybe we aren't really focused on anything or do we tend to get caught up texting or on social media or even working, do we work until the moment we go to bed, whether it's on an IEP or grading papers—I could go on about all the things that a teacher could be doing at night and on weekends. Somewhere in there, whether it's mindless activity or whether it's working, either way, it needs to be cut back. That's part of it: There's really no reason not to say, “Hey, this 10 minutes (or this 30 minutes or whatever a person can set aside) is my time; this is my time to take care of me and my health, my wellness. My ability to do for others is important and depends on me being healthy.” There's that part of it. The other part of it is that someone who is in an optimal state of well-being or feels better has more quality in each moment of the day.

As an example, let's say the teacher wants to find time to start exercising and it might be that if the teacher makes it a point to maybe pack a gym bag and either walk the track after school (assuming they have a football field or somewhere to walk around)—or maybe there's a gym membership involved.... The point [is] stopping and taking that time to exercise before [going] home. Then, the rest of the day, there would be not only that outlet for stress relief, but also feeling more relaxed, more alert and able to go on with the hours that are left in the day, until getting closer to bedtime.

I realized there could be a lot of home responsibilities too, definitely familiar with that. If we're going with that example, might say, “Okay, I'm going to go home first.” Then say if they're just feeling exhausted, foggy like as in mental fog and just not very energetic, and then let's say that you might be kind of going through your day for the next few hours, but the quality of that time isn't very good and so it might be okay he or she didn't take the 30 minutes or however long to stop and exercise. Those hours in the day

are not necessarily quality hours. Whereas when making the time for self-care, the rest of the waking time generally does feel better.

Lorraine: Well, finally, we've been talking about a personal responsibility to take care of ourselves. What can schools do though to help teachers manage their stress?

Brandi: Administrative support has been the strongest predictor of job satisfaction and teachers who feel supported by administration and by their colleague have less of a tendency to report feeling burned out than teachers in settings who feel like they don't have that support. School administrators can offer support in the things that they do have control over, such as if they have any control over scheduling and allowing the teachers some time in their workday to do the tasks that are—I mean, we know that teachers do way more than teach class. There's also a lot of preparation that goes into it and then there's a lot of scoring assessments and then of course in special education, all the paperwork. If they can allow that time just even more than is generally allowed now, then that would also perhaps feel less overwhelming when it's time for the special educator to leave for the day and go home.

Then as far as with policy makers and such—and this is where a lot of the suggestions, they do go beyond even building-level administrators. As far as recent studies, one of the top sources of job dissatisfaction and stress are all the mandates. With increasing mandates and the increasing expectations to address them, it's not that teachers don't want to be evaluated or even compensated based on how well they do: it's that they just want it to be fair. With changes in policy, there would be less stressors on the job. Now, with that being said, special education is an inherently stressful position because even if policies were where we prefer them to be and even if we were happy with all of these top-down sort of issues, well, there's still a stressful nature to it because special educators do a lot of caretaking.

Special educators are not just offering quality instruction, but also addressing every learning need. Special educators often are very compassionate and enjoy working with students who need extra help in working around obstacles and even need emotional and mental support. Either way, no matter how much you love your job and love what you're doing, you're still expending a lot of mental and emotional energy on the job. Therefore, that's detracting from your energy as a teacher, as a human being, and you have to do more to be able to keep yourself well, especially if you're choosing a job where you're in a caretaker type of position.

Lorraine: Thank you so much for talking with me today, Brandi! I just got back to work after vacation and before we talked, I was going to joke that I needed an SSMP right now. One point that you keep doubling back to and that really came through in our discussion today, I think, is that this is a great preventive, potentially life-enhancing strategy. Might be a good idea for all of our teachers to do a little formative assessment from time to time and see where we stand, wellness-wise. Thanks again so much for talking with me.

Brandi: Absolutely, I'm very glad that you had me! It's a topic I'm very passionate about, both from professional and personal experience. Stress management is really an issue for

anybody, especially when it comes to occupational stress. It is a top concern for just about every profession, but it's especially with the teaching profession for that combination of reasons that we spoke about. It's often not addressed as part of teacher preparation. Just as an example, when I was in clinical psychology—that's another helping profession, ... so you're taking care of people there, but [in that field] we also learned a lot of self-help skills. Well, in teaching, you learn a lot about caring for other people, but not necessarily how to apply that to yourself and then add the additional stressors inherent in special education and it's very crucial that special educators do take care of their well-being and know that it's not just the personal responsibility, something they owe themselves and the people around them, but they deserve that. They deserve to be happy and healthy.

Lorraine: Brandi's article, "Optimizing Special Educator Wellness and Job Performance Through Stress Management," appears in Volume 48 of *TEACHING Exceptional Children*. *TEACHING Exceptional Children* is a publication of the Council for Exceptional Children. To learn more about CEC, visit cec.sped.org.