

# Stress in Teaching

*or*

A Bridge Too Far!



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## Minnesota bridge was 'structurally deficient'

Sam Knight

The 40-year-old bridge that collapsed in Minnesota last night, causing the deaths of at least seven people, was graded "structurally deficient" two years ago but was not scheduled to be replaced until 2020. There was insufficient allowance allowed for the stresses the structure would be subjected to.



*Moral: be a bendy bridge, not a rigid one!*

## What is stress?

Stress is not the EVENT,  
it is you REACTION to it



Structural stress caused the bridge in Minnesota (front cover) to crash because the engineers had not built in the FLEXIBILITY to enable the bridge to ‘bend’ with the forces that were put on it: just like a human being who needs to ‘bend’ a little under the pressure. We need to live with the pressure, welcome it as a friend, deal with it calmly, use it as one of our ‘life-forces’

### **Interpretation: or ‘mind-readers we are not!’**

We constantly interpret what goes on around us — making sense of what others do or say, events we observe, and things we read in the newspaper or see on TV. We also interpret things that have happened in the past, or which may happen in the future. In addition, we interpret our own actions, and even the physical sensations and emotional changes happening inside us. When we walk into a classroom or go to a meeting, we interpret what the atmosphere is like before anybody speaks to us.

**Our students do the same: they interpret what we, the teacher is feeling like before we speak. Our body-language and attitude, the way we look generally, sets the tone for the lesson.**

### **Filtering**

If you tend to see all the things that are wrong but ignore the positives, then you are *filtering*. Here are some examples:

- ‘I can’t see anything good about my situation.’
- ‘I don’t have any good points.’
- ‘There’s no hope.’
- ‘All I get is pain.’
- ‘My whole year 9 class are horrible!’

Do you ever find yourself seeing all that's going *wrong* in your life but ignoring the things that are going right? It's easy to take the positives for granted because they are part of everyday life. What about, for instance, the fact that you are capable of reading this, or you have researched stress, or gone on a course? What other positives can you bring to mind that are so basic you wouldn't normally be conscious of them?

**Toolkit: something you can actually do!** Think about the class you dislike teaching the most. Think about the people in it: how many of the students in it behave badly? How many of them behave well? What is the proportion of the 'good' kids against the 'bad' kids? Are the bad kids really bad or is it just that they *behave* badly?

## Overgeneralising

People often build up one thing about themselves or their circumstances and end up thinking that it represents the whole situation or happens all the time, or is part of a never-ending pattern. For example:

- 'Everything's going wrong.'
- 'Nothing I do ever turns out right.'
- 'I'll always be a failure.'
- 'There's no hope.'

Be aware that the more you say something is so, the more you *make* it so. Putting feelings into words often has the effect of solidifying those feelings, of justifying them, making them more difficult to change in the future. When people who overgeneralise challenge themselves, they usually *see* that what they have said is not true. However it gets even harder if you have used over-generalising language to someone else. That 'someone else' tends to support those feelings even if they are only trying to sympathise, as friends do. However, with that 'understanding', they are helping you to make it still harder to change position or state of mind.

## Mind-reading

There are various ways in which we can jump to a conclusion without enough evidence. One of these is **mind-reading** — making guesses about what other people are thinking:

- 'She ignored me on purpose.'
- 'You don't really love me.'
- 'My class think I'm boring.'

- 'You're only saying that because . . . '
- My line-manger wants me to shout at my class

When you feel you have started mind-reading, ask yourself 'what is the **evidence** for me feeling like this? How do I know that my class think I'm boring? What is the actual **evidence** for that? Am I just slipping into the 'Martyr' syndrome'?

### **Low Self-Esteem**

**Look for any of the following, or any variation of them.**

- 'Whatever I do should be to the highest possible standard if I am to see myself as a worthwhile person.'
- 'I must not make a mistake – because this would prove me to be useless, lazy, or careless.'
- 'To feel good about myself, I need to have other people see me as concerned, hard-working, and successful.'
- 'It would be terrible if other people saw me as less than competent.'
- 'I could not stand to think I had failed or not done my best.'

### **Fear of being uncomfortable**

You might not like your life becoming disorganised and chaotic – the results of which you might think would be disastrous, making you feel uncomfortable and worthless:

- Every problem should have an ideal solution, and I cannot rest till I find the right one. I have to make the whole class like me
- To avoid disaster, I must keep my life predictable and have everything under control. I need my class to obey my every command immediately.
- It would be dreadful and frightening if my life and circumstances were to get out of control because I stopped striving. I need to keep everything just so, I can't be out of kilter.
- At all costs, I must avoid the emotional discomfort I would feel if I failed to maintain my standards. I will get this pain every time I am challenged by a pupil, or in confrontations.

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Remember, too, that you can accept yourself no matter what your performance. Question the myth that to be 'worthy' you have to match up to some universal standard. What standard are you using? Who set it? Your boss? Is he/she perfect?! Anyway, why do you have to be 'worthy' – as opposed to just accepting yourself regardless of your performance or achievements?

I am not suggesting you reject any idea of improving yourself. Far from it. But you can set out to improve on specific aspects – for example, your appearance, your lesson plenary, or whatever – while still accepting that you are who you are.

Self-acceptance does not need to depend on how others see you. Most people will not think badly of you for making mistakes. But even if they did, you are still the same person as you were before. Their views do not magically change you into something else. It might sometimes be difficult, but a good adage is **‘Your opinion is no concern of mine’**.

People with perfectionist tendencies often fear that if they stop the striving for perfection they will become ‘average’ or their lives muddled. But such a person would have to try to become disorganised on purpose. If they just take the pressure off themselves a little, what is likely to happen is a more realistic approach to life.

Perfectionism leads to inefficiency. There is a time management principle known as the 80/20 rule which illustrates this. You achieve 80% of the value of a task in the first 20% of the time spent on it. The other 20% of value takes up the other 80% of the time. If you were smart, you would settle for doing five tasks to an 80% level (a total gain of 400%) instead of only one task to a 100% level. This illustrates the common paradox of demanding – thinking that you should or must achieve perfection will often reduce your performance!

To summarise, here is a list of questions to ask about perfectionist beliefs:

1. Is perfection really possible?
2. What are the advantages of striving for the ultimate?
3. Are these advantages worth the hassle?
4. Does it help me achieve more – or does it lead to inefficiency?
5. Am I enjoying what I am doing – or am I only concerned with the outcome?
6. What evidence is there that life will fall apart if I drop my standards?
7. Would life be worse than it is now – or would it be a little better?
8. How does behaving less than perfectly make me 'unworthy' or a 'failure'?

### **Anger: who's in control?**

Anger is not necessarily bad. If it is directed toward changing things we dislike, then it can be functional. But it becomes self-defeating when we either see the problem inwardly but we do nothing, or let it out in ways that are destructive to ourselves or others – which is what happens when our anger arises from demands.

‘People should always do the right thing. When they are unfair or selfish, they must be blamed and punished’.

*Wanting* people to behave in certain ways is not a problem. But *believing* that they ‘should’ or ‘must’ can be harmful to your well-being. Demandingness is the primary cause of hostile, dysfunctional anger. Every time you use the word ‘should’ about someone else you are being judgemental and critical, or trying to make them feel guilty. Every time you use the ‘should’ word against yourself, you are pouring guilt on ... yourself! Examine these statements:

‘I should have bought more bread’.

‘I should eat more fruit’.

‘I should have told him what i really think’.

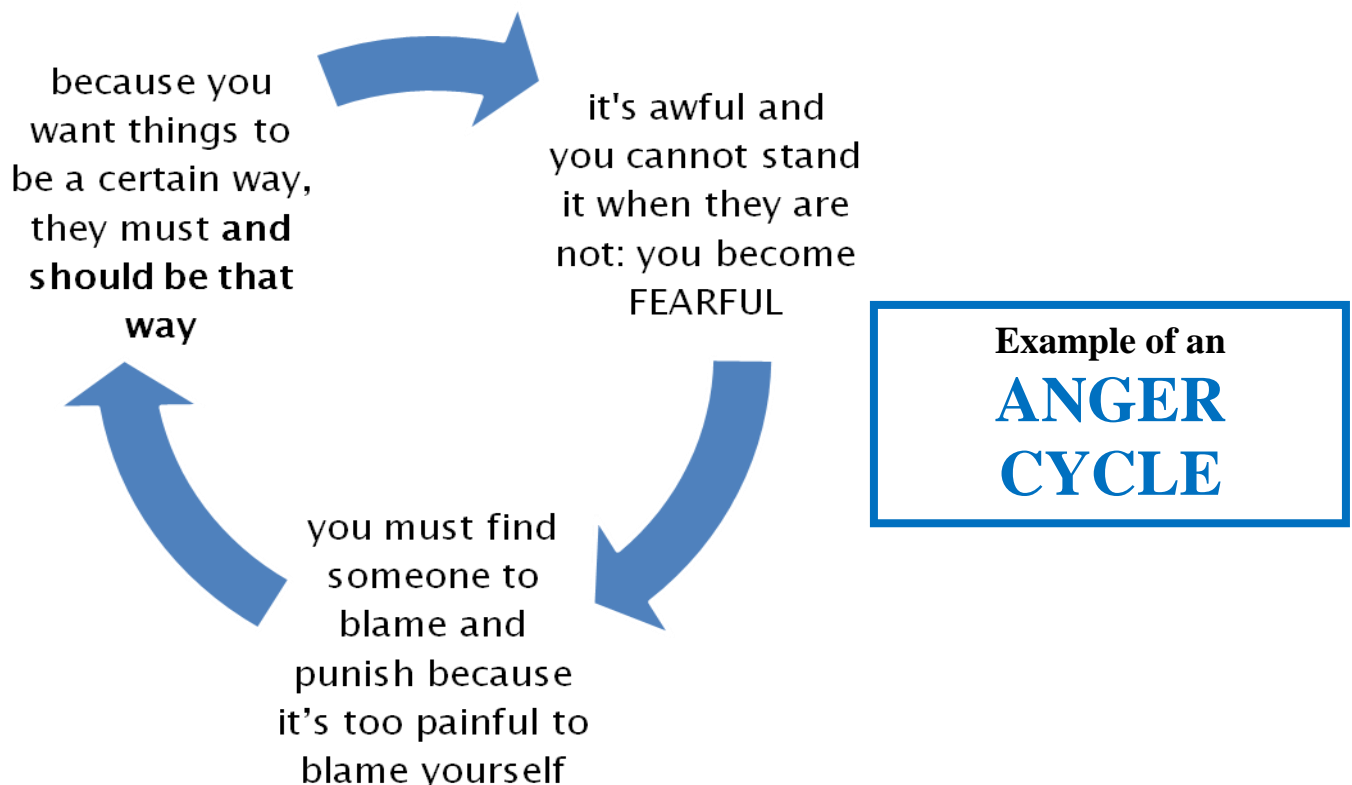
It is commonly thought that people get angry because they are frustrated. It is true that people usually feel frustrated when they do not get what they want. But not everyone who feels frustrated reacts the same way. Some react with disappointment (a rational response). Some even see it as a challenge. Unfortunately, though, many engage in self-pity, put themselves down – or get angry.

### Reality check: moving to realistic thinking

Distorted thinking	Realistic thinking
I’m a total failure.	I failed this time.
Everything’s wrong.	I’m facing some problems at present.
It’s got to be done perfectly or not at all.	I’d prefer to get it just right, but less than perfect will do.
This is totally wrong.	I disagree with some aspects of this.
She made me angry.	I don’t like what she did, but I made myself angry by the way I viewed it.
She did it because she hates me.	I don’t know why she did it. There’s more than one possible explanation.
Everyone will think I’m stupid.	Some people may be critical of me. They will soon move on to other thoughts.
I’ll never be happy again.	Sure, things aren’t so good now. But how do I know what the future holds?
All I get is pain.	I get a lot of pain. But there are also some good things that happen — if I’d only be prepared to notice them. Recognise the fact that there are good things as well as things you’d rather forget.

Sometimes it is hard to know for sure just what is going on. You won't always have enough information to be certain. But it is important to at least recognise that there may be more than one way to interpret a given situation. By doing so, you can avoid jumping to erroneous and possibly harmful conclusions. That could be the best way to avoid distorting reality: retain a healthy scepticism about it.




Situations do not cause stress: that comes from your reaction to a situation. Similarly, frustration by itself does not cause anger – but the way you view frustration does. Extreme anger tends to result when things do not happen the way you want them to



Frustration is a form of anger. People tend to get angry **not because they are frustrated** – but rather **because they believe that they should not be frustrated.** They impose rules on the world and the people in it, often rules from the family, or tribe. They see it as unbearable for these rules to be broken. They think that anyone who breaks these rules is a bad person.

The way you feel is the result of what you tell yourself about the things that happen.

You can't do anything about this	You CAN do something about this	You CAN AND WANT to do something about this
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You ask Peter for his homework and he says he couldn't be bothered	Peter is horrible, I don't like him, and he's always disrespecting me. The rest of the class think I'm weak.	You get tense, your heartbeat increases, your brain sends messages to the rest of your body, 'prepare for confrontation'

People tend to think that their past affects the way they feel in the present. This can be true, but it is also true to say that there IS AN ALTERNATIVE. You can make a decision to think in a different way, but only if you can first agree that IT IS POSSIBLE.

The past is important, because it leaves us with our current attitudes and beliefs. External events — whether in the past, present or future — cannot influence the way you feel or behave until you become aware of and begin to think about them. The past has gone. Past experiences helped form your belief system, but it is the **beliefs you hold now** (wherever they came from) which **cause your reactions** in the present.

It is a choice. Do you want to change your beliefs? What you can't do is change the past, but you can change your view of it.



Tip: Be Flexible

Flexible people can ride with a problem. They know how to adjust to changes that call for new ways of thinking. They know that however bad they feel they will get better.

## Overcoming Obstacles

### Avoidance and commitment

Avoidance is easy in the short term – it usually creates greater problems later on:

- Avoiding decisions or action maintains tension and leaves problems unsolved.



**Taking responsibility for emotions and behaviours is the basis for taking control over your life and committing yourself to action and involvement.**

- Actively pursuing your goals, rather than waiting and dreaming.
- Choosing to work at managing stress, developing your potential, and changing things you dislike, rather than just drifting along or expecting a miracle to occur.