



Red4EdNC

Teaching with Anxiety and Depression

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When I started teaching, I was in the middle of a major depressive episode that lasted for the better part of my twenties. I was also struggling with an anxiety disorder that had affected me since adolescence. I used to joke that teaching was either going to kill me or cure me.

I worked so many hours and took such poor care of myself that I was always on edge and sick. Every bit of social energy I had was drained at school, so I became even more distant from my friends and family. I had also never endured such harsh and constant criticism in my entire life. I had always been a top student and a valued employee, but as a teacher I could not satisfy anyone - students, parents, colleagues, administrators, or myself.

Every Sunday, I would wake up paralyzed with anxiety over the coming week. I knew I had a whole day of work to do, but I was too physically and mentally exhausted to get started. As the hours passed, my agitation became more and more debilitating. Sometimes I snapped out of it and stayed up all night to get my work done, and other times I tossed and turned trying to shut out the guilt. I dreaded walking into the building on Monday morning because it felt like wading into the ocean knowing that I was about to get hit by a tidal wave.

With continued mental health care and family support, I began to surface from my depression. Ultimately, teaching did help me with some of my biggest issues. When there is literally no way to please everyone...you have to learn to trust yourself when you are right, forgive yourself when you are wrong, and still get a good night's sleep when you can't figure out what to do. Once I became a mother, my children helped restore the joy in life I had lost over the years. I cut back on my hours at work and spent more time connecting with my family. With increased confidence and contentment, I was more at ease and successful with my students. I even started to gain professional respect from colleagues.

Last school year, I began to feel my anxiety getting out of control again. When I stayed up until after midnight at least three nights a week grading papers, planning lessons, and organizing field trips - it was driven by the stress of having too much to do in too little time. But it was also fueled by the fear of losing the ground that I had gained over the years. Converting my courses to new curriculum and 21st century teaching methods was rewarding, but I had to work ridiculous hours to juggle everything and keep all the balls in the air. When I realized that NC teachers were not going to be given sufficient time and resources to handle these changes and meet increasingly high standards, [I began to get angry](#). Over the summer, I decided I would not do any school work. I focused only on my family and health, which was both therapeutic and rejuvenating. When school started back, I was committed to keeping my stress level down. I even continued to go swimming and play tennis in my

free time. I decided to wrap up work every day when it was time to pick up my son and stopped bringing work home. For the most part, I stuck to the plan.

I knew this experiment would be a struggle for me, but I never predicted what actually transpired. Despite cutting back on my hours, and despite enjoying my time in class with students more than ever, my anxiety returned. I was more forgetful and disorganized and prone to mistakes. I started to toss and turn again, and my bad school dreams recurred. I gave up recreation so I could keep up with my school work in the afternoon and spend time with my kids in the evenings. I began to feel sick all the time, but I would not take time off to go to the doctor because I felt I couldn't afford to get even more behind.

My family was also going through some changes that demanded more of my time and attention. Our son started kindergarten, our dog needed to be put to sleep, and we moved out of our house and in with my parents while we found a new place to live. We usually try to avoid big things like this during the school year since my husband and I are both teachers. But that is not always possible, and I thought it would be okay because I wasn't working nearly as much as usual. Even though I had cut back, I was still working about two hours of unpaid overtime a day. By the end of the semester, I was having such extreme fatigue that there were times when I had to teach sitting down because I could not physically stand.

Even though I was not having serious emotional issues, my doctor explained that I had become physiologically depressed. I suffered from constant fatigue, headaches, muscle pains, light-headedness, and loss of concentration. Treatment helped but with my immune system down, I got strep throat and developed shingles. Taking five sick days in one semester is stressful, especially when you have 96 students with senioritis. To finish grades in time to determine senior exam exemptions, I had to stay up after midnight three nights in a row. When I was a few minutes late to pick up my son one day because I lost track of time, he broke down in tears. The teacher waiting with him said he was worried that something had happened to me because I had been feeling so bad.

The next week, even when I could have gone to bed early, I couldn't sleep. I had several seniors who I felt pressure to pass despite their failing grade and lack of effort, a student who got away with cheating because I couldn't prove exactly how she did it, and another who used an anonymous survey to call me a "mother F-ing b%#^h a\$\$ c*n#". I tried everything to get it off my mind - seeking advice from other teachers, making plans to tackle these kinds of issues next year more effectively, and finding the humor in the situation ([see here](#)).

I am definitely in need of "the serenity to accept the things I can't change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." In fact, we all need to remember this mantra. On a personal level, teachers can set limits and stop sacrificing family time and health trying to meet unreasonable expectations. We also need serious dialogue amongst educators about what things are and are not in our control to fix. There are things that CAN be done to alleviate the strain all teachers are feeling, but we have to mobilize the community to make it a political priority.

I wish I could tell you an inspiring story about how I have overcome all of this and learned to manage the stress of teaching. I want to hold onto the happiness and fulfillment I felt tonight at graduation, celebrating the students that I have had the honor to teach and see grow over the past few years. I hope that people will care that teachers are struggling and need more help to carry the weight of their responsibilities. For better or worse, our well-being is inextricably linked to that of all our children.