

In the know ...

Your wellbeing as an NQT is vital and you should be learning now the habits that will sustain you through a long and successful teaching career. Sophie Howells offers some advice and encouragement.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH



NQT Special: Protecting yourself

At this crucial stage in your first year, making your wellbeing a priority is essential. Every NQT should take steps to ensure this is the case. In doing so, you will be forming good career-lasting habits.

You will be well used to planning lessons now but planning your own personal work/life balance is essential too. Our most recent Teacher Wellbeing Index found that 74 per cent of education professionals consider the inability to switch off and relax to be a major contributing factor to a negative work/life balance. We also know from our research that trainee and early career teachers can be more likely to struggle with this, and are 25 per cent more likely to experience a mental health problem compared to colleagues (Education Support Partnership, 2018).

So, if you are struggling, lay down some basic rules for yourself in and out of school to help keep yourself mentally and physically healthy and robust.

Workload

Most NQTs are likely to say they feel overwhelmed at this stage. Friends and loved ones may find it hard to understand why you are giving so much time to the job. Moving towards winter this can be exacerbated by ill-health and the demands of the festive season. This can add more pressure when you are already feeling overloaded.

One NQT, Helen, told us that a key step for her was to make sure she has a night to herself each week. Breaks are an important aspect of both time management and wellbeing. Taking regular breaks can ensure we are able to deliver and perform at maximum capacity. Staying at school longer to do marking, and working through every break time is not the best use of your time if you are already exhausted. If the day has been stressful and you are anxious about something, set a boundary. Allow time to talk through your concerns outside school, but once that time has come to an end then stop. Do not continue to talk or worry about the situation for the rest of the evening. Try to switch off.

Using your mentor effectively

Do not be afraid to ask for help. Your mentor is there to support and guide you, so establishing a good relationship with them and enough contact time is crucial to a successful year. You should be able to expect scheduled time together and the more you are able to prepare for these meetings, the more control you will have to get what you need.

Behaviour

Feeling under-prepared and ill-equipped to manage disruptive behaviour can be a major frustration for new teachers and can easily threaten or have a negative impact on your wellbeing.

In our Teacher Wellbeing Index, 43 per cent of education professionals who said they had experienced mental health symptoms said that student behaviour was the cause. It is important to talk through and seek advice and strategies from your mentor, peers and colleagues who have come up against similar scenarios and experiences.

A self-care plan

While you are planning, make sure you make time for a good sleep. A range of research shows that bad sleepers are more likely to have relationship problems, suffer daytime fatigue, and have poor concentration at work, among other problems. Tempting as it may be to get up and do a couple of hours work before school, work all day and start it all again the following day, it is unsustainable and far from healthy.

Instead, make sure you get time to relax before going to bed. Try not to use devices as they are proven to disrupt the body's natural sleep patterns (Haas, 2018). Instead, read a book, have a bath or listen to music. If you need to, write your worries down. Writing it down and letting it go really does help.

We have partnered with the BBC to support its new wellbeing and support space for teachers. There you can watch a range of films and find helpful and supportive content. One article on BBC Teach worth checking out offers tips for building resilience (BBC Teach, 2019) and has been written by Dr Emma Kell, teacher and author of *How to Survive in Teaching* (2018).

Talk to someone who understands

Run by trained and accredited counsellors, the Education Support Partnership's free and confidential helpline provides access to in-the-moment support, up to six sessions of structured telephone counselling, and assistance with referrals for longer-term treatments. Our counsellors deal with almost 10,000 cases of education staff in crisis every year and demand for the service reached record levels in 2018. We are also hearing from more and more teachers who are already in crisis.

Furthermore, we have recently expanded the helpline service to include access for all trainee teachers. Last autumn, more than 33,000 people across the UK began initial teacher training and of those who used the service in the last year, 86 per cent said that the helpline had had a positive impact on their situation.

Any trainee teacher, NQT or indeed seasoned professional who is feeling overwhelmed, fearful, worried or anxious should call us, no matter how insignificant they think their problems are.

- ***Sophie Howells is from the Education Support Partnership. First published 19th November 2019.***

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