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THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

Advisers must put their own wellness first
in order to be most effective in the role

BY JIM PATERSON

Mark Skowron slept well on a cold night last December before a big holiday event sponsored by his students, but it had not always been that easy. In the past, he often tossed and turned, concerned that his students' thorough planning still might have left some gaps.

In the past, he'd also mull over the busy day he faced in multiple roles: as coordinator of student affairs, co-director of the leadership academy, student union adviser, and classroom teacher at the nearly 2,000-student Lancaster High School in Lancaster, NY. He struggled with the common stressors that nearly all educators face and those that come from the extra responsibilities of being an adviser.



In addition to the poor sleep, Skowron regularly had headaches and watched his blood pressure and weight soar. Then he made some changes—to his schedule and his mindset.

“When I first started in these positions, I wanted all of our projects to be perfect, with every detail thought through. I’ve learned it’s the students’ project. They need to own it, take care of it, and learn from their mistakes. I don’t expect perfection; I celebrate growth.”

Now the blood pressure medicine and the headaches are gone—along with 50 pounds. That night before a Christmas party for 125 guests from group homes, he was able to stop worrying about whether the music was properly arranged and other minute details.

“At the end of the event, the guests will leave happy with their craft, cookies, and their chance to meet Santa. The fact there wasn’t Bing Crosby singing as they entered won’t even occur to them. Students are going to make mistakes, forget things, or fail, and I need to let that happen,” he realized.

Skowron has tackled what a lot of leadership advisers face in their positions—extra responsibilities that can range from motivating or securing the safe travel of a large group of students to handling the hurt feelings of one. The changes he implemented are ones that many experts recommend.

TAKING ITS TOLL

Stress seems ubiquitous in our culture, particularly for educators.

A study titled “2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey” by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) says: “The stressful workload, the feeling of having to be always on, the lack of resources, and the burden of ever-changing expectations take a toll on educators, and the health problems educators face are compounded by deficient building conditions, equipment and staff shortages, and insufficient time to prepare and collaborate with colleagues.”

The AFT research showed that about two-thirds of teachers say their job is always or often stressful, and about 80 percent say they are emotionally and physically exhausted most days, which affects their family life. A 2013 study by MetLife showed that 59 percent said they were extremely stressed, up from 35 percent in 1985.

“It’s often even worse for advisers,” says Tei Street, a speaker who has addressed the topic at LEAD Conferences and for educators nationwide. “They often are the most stressed because they teach, take on outside activities with students, and often are leaders in a school.”

She says if advisers don’t address the issue, they can become burned out to a level where they aren’t effective with students,

they are severely compromised personally, and they often feel compelled to leave the profession.

Patricia Jennings, a professor of education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA, who has studied the issue of teacher burnout and helped found CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) to help teachers build their emotional health, says advisers have to be proactive.

“Because their attention is so outwardly directed, they often fail to notice the stress response beginning to arise,” she says. “When stress gets the better of them, they can lose their composure and react to student behavior in ways that may interfere with the supportive relationships they are trying to build.”

She says stress affects a person’s body, mood, and behavior, creating irritability and fatigue, head and muscle aches, and stomach issues. It often leads to anxiety, sadness, or even depression through what she calls a “burnout cascade,” where the spiral of the stress and its symptoms build on each other.

An educator can’t do their job in those circumstances and may exaggerate issues with student behavior, or be impatient or angry and misinterpret interpersonal cues. Or, they might just lack the necessary energy, she says.

FINDING SOME SPACE

Christopher James, activities director at Sunrise Mountain High School in Las Vegas, says advisers can’t be good role models for students facing their own stressors if they don’t successfully manage their own.

James carefully works with calendars—his own, his group’s, and the school’s master calendar—well in advance. He establishes most of the activities for the upcoming school year the previous May and plugs them into the school’s plans.

“Calendar is vital,” James says. “It allows you to eyeball very busy periods, program downtime for yourself and students, allocate resources, and backwards-plan.”

Downtime is critical in chunks both through the year and day to day.

“One thing that is 99 percent nonnegotiable is my 30 minutes of lunch. I don’t work and I don’t stay in my room. That small break keeps me fresh and puts me in a different space mentally and physically. It helps tremendously,” he says.

Street says advisers, who are often the first to volunteer or help, need to examine ways to program in downtime. “The word ‘no’ is one of the healthiest words we have. There is nothing wrong with being energetic and agreeable, but advisers have to know when to politely decline,” she says.

It is part of establishing clear expectations from the various people with whom they work, she says, through open communications. Careful planning and accurate and current information can often reduce stress caused by uncertainty or misunderstandings.

Michelle McGrath, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils and the author of a new book on the topic, believes advisers need to start with establishing personal goals and making them specific.

“So often we just think about what we need to do. Our intentions never reach the next stage,” she says. “Research confirms that writing our intentions down is really the only way we build neuroplasticity in our brains, and ultimately, maneuver through fear and chaos.” Neuroplasticity is the structure changes in the brain that adapt to changing circumstances and control our thought patterns.

McGrath says advisers should learn more about the brain and the positive effects of techniques such as mindfulness. “You have to take time to understand how your brain functions and implement practices to control it. And you have to surround yourself with people who make you the best version of yourself,” she says. So, effective collaboration is key.

Jennings advocates for mindfulness, and she says it is often simpler than you might assume.

“When we notice tension in our shoulders and jaw, usually we are feeling stress. We need to literally take a breather—take a few slow, deep breaths to calm down. Notice the physical sensation. Then we’re ready to respond thoughtfully rather than react automatically in ways we might later regret.”

GET PHYSICAL

Physical activity has long- and short-term benefits, Street says. It can reduce stress immediately and create fitness that increases a person’s ability to handle their workload and stressors over time. Beyond that, it helps combat other threats to a healthy lifestyle that can grow from an adviser’s busy schedule: less physical activity and too much access to fast, unhealthy food.

“My problems due to my schedule were all directly related to poor teenage eating habits and lack of time for my own exercise, combined with stress,” Skowron says.

He built time into each day to work out and connected with other teachers to play sports and exercise together. He began reading food labels, monitoring what he ate, and making better choices, all while working with students to do the same. “We’ve added a salad option every time we order pizza and wings,” he says. And he encourages students to join him in physical activity.

WELLNESS FOR ALL

Here are some ways advisers can help students maintain their own well-being:

Adults who work with young people inevitably become involved in their emotional concerns, especially those who work with them in cocurricular activities.

Phyllis Fagel, a school counselor and private therapist who writes about helping adolescents develop emotionally, says advisers can first help students by explaining mental health concerns.

“I’m a big believer in educators defining depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, and self-identifying as helpers,” she says. “They also can normalize failure with prompts such as, ‘What mistake did you learn the most from this week?’”

Emotional intelligence is also a skill set that experts increasingly believe students should acquire.

“Teachers can help students connect thoughts, feelings, and behaviors by incorporating discussions about emotions into their routines, and they can help kids identify coping strategies that work for them, such as taking a deep breath, getting a drink of water, proactively solving a problem, or challenging distorted thinking.”

Counseling professionals and other educators increasingly use solution-focused counseling with young people, offering strategies to help students be proactive and handle problems in a structured way. But Fagel and other experts also warn that advisers must understand boundaries.

“A teacher can do more harm than good if they try to solve something that’s out of their skill set. They also need to establish healthy boundaries.”

She says they should educate themselves about professional resources that are available for young people and connect their students to them when necessary, often a school counselor.

Street says collaborating on health with students—who are such a big part of an adviser’s day—makes sense. “It is important to be a good role model about your emotional and physical health, too,” she says. “That might be one of the most important lessons you teach.” ●

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