

Managing Stress: Secure Zone



I was speaking to a group of educators about managing stress and preventing burnout. During the morning break, I was approached by a high-school physics teacher and I took the opportunity to ask her how she managed the demands and stress of teaching.

“I take a 30-minute break in the teacher’s lounge,” she said. She paused a moment, eyes downcast, before looking back up at me again and correcting her response. “Well, I used to do that, but not anymore.”

“Really? Why not?” I asked.

“Well, I went to the lounge to relax a bit, talk to friends, take some refreshment, and get set for the rest of the day. But I found that the atmosphere was too often charged with drama, negativity, and gossip. I left more stressed than when I went in.”

She added that it wasn’t just her that found that the lounge atmosphere was counterproductive. She said that she and six other teachers decided to reconvene their in-school break as an after-school session once or twice a week at a nearby Panera Bread restaurant. She said, “We talk about a lot of the same topics we discussed in the

teacher's lounge, but the tone of our conversations is different. Instead of just complaining we talk about how we can make things better.”

She looked directly at me with a broad smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye and added, “And we laugh a lot.”

Negativity can weaken the individual and pollute the organizational immune system. The tone and nature of our interactions, in all walks of our lives, affect us – positively or negatively.

A client of mine sets a “five-minute complaint rule” for all company meetings. People are free to complain all they want during the first five minutes of a meeting. After that, they have to restrict their comments to productive topics expressed in positive tones. Management and employees report that their meetings are less stressful and that there is an increase in innovative ideas.

Perhaps you should consider establishing a “secure zone” where you can go to mitigate the stress, gain needed respite, and energize you for the tasks ahead.