

The following is an excerpt from *Zen and the Mindful Classroom: The Stress Reduction Program for Students and Educators*, by Kimberly Post Rowe, 2006. Call 207-650-3964 or visit <http://www.mbtherapy.org> or <http://www.fiveseeds.org> for more information.

## What is Stress?

Stress can be defined as “the body’s automatic physiologic reaction to circumstances that require behavioral adjustment.”<sup>i</sup> To put it more simply, stress is a reaction to change. Any type of change might make you feel stressed, even good change. It’s not just the change or event itself, but how you react to it that matters. What feels stressful to one person may not to another.

If left untreated, stress can cause extensive damage to a one’s overall sense of well-being. It is directly linked to many physical ailments, such as headaches, gastrointestinal distress, and high blood pressure. Chronic stress has been linked to more serious systemic illnesses such as diabetes, decreased immunocompetence, and even some forms of cancer.

When we feel stressed, our brain activates the sympathetic nervous system, triggering what first described by Dr. Walter B. Cannon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the *fight-or-flight* response. Adrenaline revs up the body to survive a threat; the heart pumps faster and harder, causing a spike in blood pressure; airways dilate to bring more oxygen into the body; blood sugar rises to provide a ready supply of fuel; some blood vessels constrict to shunt blood away from the skin and into the body’s core, while others dilate to bring more blood to the brain and limbs. Now the body is pumped up to fight or run, and the mind is hyper-alert, ready to escape a threatening or dangerous situation by either fighting or running.

The problem is that for many of us, the fight-or-flight response rarely switches off and stress hormones wash through our bodies almost continually. Today we worry more about money, getting stuck in traffic, or our relationships than we do about fighting off a wild animal, but even though the perceived threat is psychological, it still triggers this archaic survival response. Since these stressors are present almost continually, the sympathetic nervous system rarely powers down.

But there is another response to the challenges of everyday living hard-wired into our nervous systems: the rest-and-digest response. When the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, the heart rate drops, blood pressure falls, and respiration slows and deepens. This allows digestion to resume as blood flow to the core of the body is reestablished, and our immune systems receive a boost as we are infused with a sense of well-being. This state happens naturally while laughing, relaxing with friends, or deep in sleep. But as a society, we have come to view this feeling of well-being as far from the norm, while accepting chronic stress as inevitable.

With the rapid changes occurring in our modern society—the breakdown of the family unit, loss of structured social networks, and increasing academic and personal pressures, to name a few—both students and teachers are experiencing stress in record numbers. Emerging research shows that prolonged stress has a negative impact on physical, emotional, and spiritual health, including academic performance and life choices. It is of vital importance that we teach our youth effective coping skills and mirror these positive changes by practicing them ourselves. Calm, centered, and stable teachers will create calm, centered, and stable classrooms.

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<sup>i</sup> Excerpt from the Mind/Body Medical Institute’s website, [http://www.mbmi.org/basics/whatis\\_stress\\_response.asp](http://www.mbmi.org/basics/whatis_stress_response.asp) (2005).