



ONE NATION UNDER STRESS

By Rafael Heller | Oct 28, 2019 | Editor's Note

According to Gallup’s (2019) most recent international [survey of emotional health](#), Americans are more frazzled than ever before. On any given day, roughly 55% of us say we feel highly stressed. (Only the citizens of Greece, the Philippines, and Tanzania report higher rates.)

What’s gotten into us? It’s complicated, says the eminent Stanford University biologist Robert Sapolsky, who has spent nearly four decades studying stress, its causes, and its effects. On one hand, stress hormones help humans, like other mammals, respond to immediate physical threats (e.g., hungry lions) and ongoing challenges (e.g., looking for food in the dry season). On the other hand, those hormones also respond to social and psychological conditions. Unlike, say, zebras (Sapolsky, 2004), we humans fret about what might happen tomorrow, what happened yesterday, and what didn’t happen at all. We torment ourselves over insults real and perceived. We agonize over threats to our social status. In short, we give ourselves ulcers for a dizzying array of reasons, which have only been amplified by our growing income inequality, declining social cohesion, increasingly sedentary lifestyles, racial tensions, and other political, economic, and societal changes.

Unfortunately, though, our popular media tend to project a much simpler, one-dimensional version of what stress is and how to cope with it, warns Sapolsky. We Americans tend to think about stress as a personal problem for individuals to “manage” with diet, exercise, yoga, and spa days. As Sapolsky puts it in a [recent interview](#) with Salon magazine (DeVega, 2019), many people have the “absurd notion that we all have the power to be free from stress if we only had the right attitude and . . . the correct internal coping mechanisms.” But let’s be honest: No amount of self-care will “make a dent in your life if you are homeless or if you’re a refugee or if you have a terminal disease.”

How, then, should we cope with our stress? That depends, argues Sapolsky, on what’s making us stressed in the first place. (Paying the rent? Impressing our parents? Dealing with climate change?) We shouldn’t expect to find one-size-fits-all solutions, he concludes. People need to find the “right strategy for the right time.”

Today, countless schools across the country are investing in mindfulness programs and wellness rooms. And plenty of research suggests that such programs tend to be helpful. However, by focusing too narrowly on mindfulness and other kinds of stress management, we risk distracting ourselves from the social and institutional forces that are causing so many of us to be so stressed out in the first place.

As the contributors to this month’s Kappan describe, those causes are complex, having to do with the inadequacy of the resources we provide our teachers, the lack of opportunities for our students to know and be known by their peers, and even the ways in which we introduce and talk about our classroom assignments. There is much that we can do to make our schools less stressful places, but first we will need to understand the stressors we face.

References

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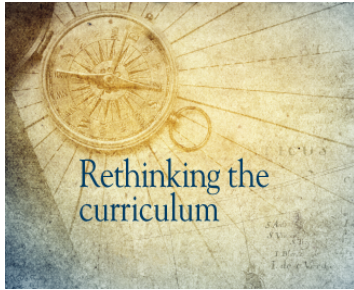
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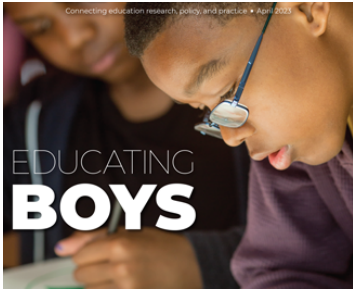
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