

## Being a Resilient Educator: Thriving in the Face of Challenges

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### Being a Resilient Educator

Working as a teacher, mental health practitioner, or administrator can be incredibly rewarding, but it also comes with its fair share of challenges. Whether it's a tough day in the classroom, navigating tricky situations with colleagues or parents, having too much work to do, or even managing personal issues at home, we've all had moments where we feel overwhelmed -those feelings of anger, anxiety, or just feeling down. They're completely normal.

But when those emotions take over, and we're not fully aware, they can hijack our ability to think clearly. Suddenly, problem-solving feels impossible, self-control slips away, and performing at our best becomes a struggle. Chronic levels of job stress can lead to burnout and associated mental health issues.

This is where resilience comes in—a skill that can make all the difference when life throws curveballs your way. No matter how skilled you are at managing classrooms, creating behaviour intervention plans, leading teams, or juggling the many demands of your role, resilience is the key to unlocking your full potential when things get tough.

Think of resilience as your emotional circuit breaker. Just as a circuit breaker prevents electrical overload, resilience prevents emotional overload. It's not about never feeling stressed (that's impossible!), but about:

1. Recognising your emotions—anxiety, anger, feeling down, etc.—and understanding how upset you are.
2. Preventing being emotionally overwhelmed before it takes over.
3. Managing your behaviour even when emotions run high — avoiding lashing out or withdrawing at the wrong times.
4. Calming yourself down within a reasonable time frame when you feel extremely upset.
5. Returning to work and relationships with renewed energy and focus after a setback.

When faced with a challenging and threatening situation (stressful events), your brain's alarm system (the amygdala) kicks into gear, which is great when you need quick reactions but not so helpful when you need to think clearly and respond professionally. The good news? Your brain's "wise leader" (the prefrontal cortex) can learn to step in and help you stay calm and focused.

### Resilience: Big Picture Ideas

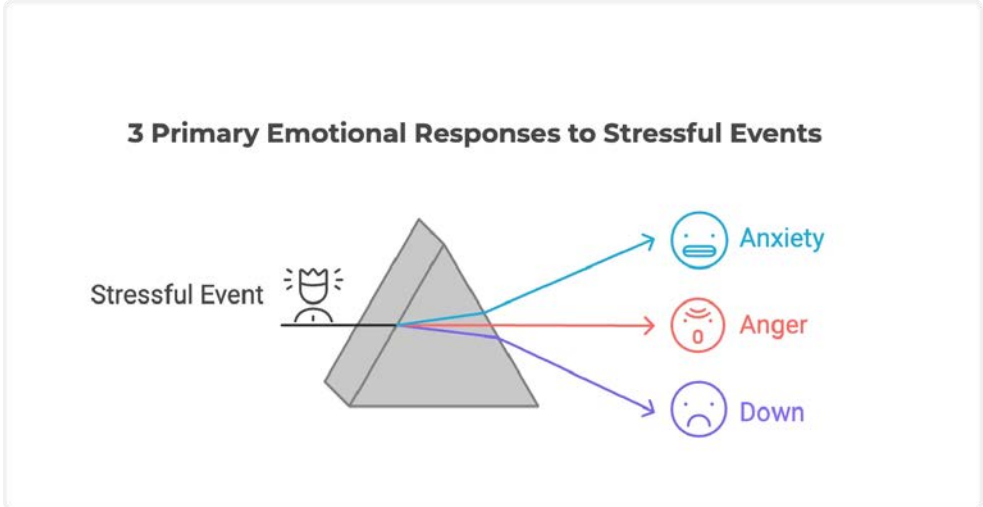
Let's dive into some big-picture ideas about resilience and how it can help you navigate the ups and downs of working in schools. Whether you're a teacher, special educator, administrator, or mental health practitioner, understanding how emotions, thinking patterns, and adverse events interact is the key to staying calm, focused, and effective.

#### A. Emotions at Work

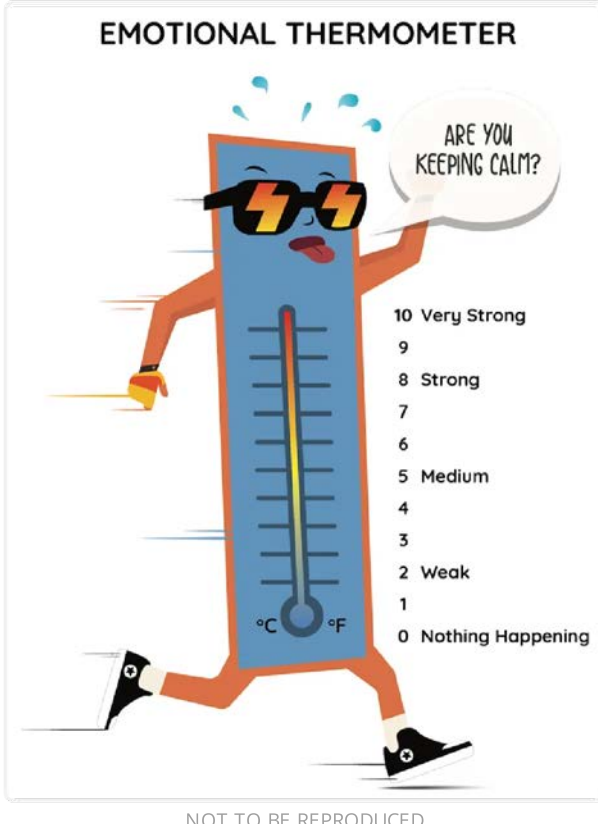
##### Emotional Vocabulary

As educators, we experience three primary emotional responses to stressful events:

- **Anxiety**  
When we feel uncertain or threatened by what others think of us or how well we will perform.
- **Anger**  
When we feel our boundaries are crossed, values violated, unfairness, disrespect.
- **Down**  
When we experience disapproval, criticism, rejection or performance failure.



These emotions are entirely normal—believe it or not, they can even be helpful. Sometimes, they motivate us to tackle adversity head-on. Sometimes, they challenge our curiosity to learn more about why we feel like we do. The key isn't avoiding these emotions but learning to recognise, label, and manage them effectively.



##### Emotional Temperature Check

Emotions have temperatures, and they aren't just on or off. Knowing the degree of emotional upset you experience helps you navigate stress and control how difficult situations affect you.

Think of it like an Emotional Thermometer. Let's say a student talks back to you in class. You might feel anything from mild annoyance (a 1 or 2 on the thermometer) to full-blown rage (a 9 or 10).

The problem arises when our emotions hit those extreme levels because our behaviour can become erratic—whether snapping at someone or withdrawing altogether.

The Sweet Spot. Aim to stay in the 4-7 range, where you're engaged but not overwhelmed. This is your "optimal performance zone," where you can think clearly and respond effectively.

(Click [here](#) to purchase Emotional Thermometer posters)

#### B. Stressful Events at Work; What Are Your Triggers?

Let's face it—schools are complex environments. Between the growing needs of students and families, constant interactions with colleagues and parents, heavy workloads, and public accountability for results, there's no shortage of stressors. It's no wonder that many educators report feeling varying degrees of anger, anxiety, or sadness when faced with these challenges.

Here are just a few examples of adverse events you might encounter:

- Feeling overwhelmed by administrative tasks that take time away from teaching.
- Struggling with disengaged students who aren't responding to your lessons.
- Dealing with difficult conversations with parents or colleagues.

It is important to know your triggers – those adverse events that can get you to the top of the Emotional Thermometer. These triggering events fall within your "zone of vulnerability." These differ from person to person.

Examples of Triggering Events

The good news is that you are not alone in facing these challenges, and there are ways to shift your thinking and response so they don't take a toll.

#### C. Thinking Makes It So

Here's a powerful truth.

It's not the situation itself that determines how calm or upset we feel—it's our thinking about the situation. Two people can experience the same challenge but react differently based on their mindset. Let's break this down with two examples.

Anger			
Happening	Thinking	Feeling	Behaviour
Too many work demands/events and not enough time for teaching.	Teacher A It's awful to have to put so many hours both inside and outside the classroom. Schools are really lousy places to work when they give us teachers too much work and not enough time to do it. When this happens, it's more than I can take.	extreme frustration, anger exhaustion	negativity pulling back
	Teacher B I wish I didn't have so much marking and admin. While it's bad when it happens, I can cope with the extra hours though I prefer otherwise. That's the way school is, lots of muddles and puddles.	annoyed in control	engaged

Down			
Happening	Thinking	Feeling	Behaviour
Students not enjoying a lesson and being disengaged.	Teacher A I think I'm a failure when I haven't "gotten through" to a class. To make mistakes or perform poorly as a teacher is one of the worst things in the world. I can't stand it when I put all my energy in a student or class and get no results.	extremely down	withdrawal
	Teacher B I prefer to be successful and have my work approved of by others. When I am not, it's bad, but not the end of the world. I can cope. I'll try to figure out if there is anything I can do.	disappointed	constructive action

Remember: Your thoughts are powerful tools.

They can either escalate or de-escalate your emotional temperature. The goal isn't to never get upset—it's to stay within a range where you can think clearly and respond effectively.

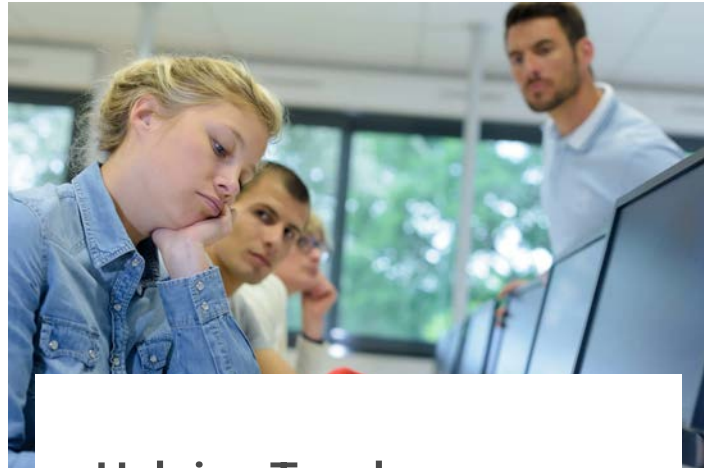
The ideas above have helped countless educators move from:

- **Feeling overwhelmed** → **Feeling capable**
- **Reacting automatically** → **Responding thoughtfully**
- **Withdrawing from others** → **Staying connected**
- **Dreading challenges** → **Facing them with confidence**

Resilience isn't just about surviving—it's about thriving in the face of challenges. As an educator (or in any demanding role), resilience is your secret weapon for navigating the complexities of your profession while maintaining your wellbeing. Without it, stress can take over; with it, you're empowered to handle anything that comes your way.

See my follow-up article, [10 Hacks for Building Your Resilience](#), for even more strategies.

These practical tips, strategies, or techniques can help people develop and strengthen their psychological resilience—their ability to bounce back from difficulties, adapt to change, and cope with stress and adversity.



#### Helping Teachers Navigate Student Disrespect

Research consistently shows that early intervention is key, with schools ideally positioned to implement mental health programs that reach young people during their formative years.

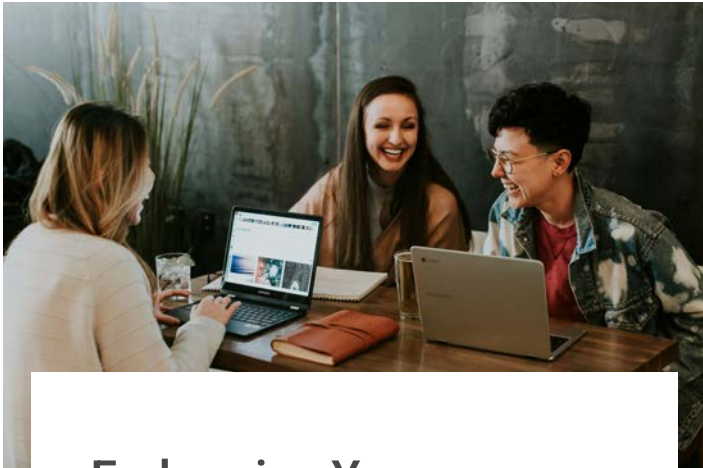
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#### Easy-to-Teach Preventative Mental Health: CBT in Action

Research consistently shows that early intervention is key, with schools ideally positioned to implement mental health programs that reach young people during their formative years.

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