

# “I Feel Like I’m Dying” by Janet Fitzgerald

“I feel like I’m dying,” she said aloud at a faculty meeting. The principal was trying to inspire teachers to visit other classrooms during their prep time. She said she has no extra time to watch other teachers, even if it is a great idea. She can barely breathe.

“I feel like I’m dying.” She said it a couple of months ago. She said it not long after another teacher mentioned that teaching AP for the first time this year makes her want to be “curled up in the fetal position.”

“I feel like I’m dying.” I can’t stop thinking about it.

The social-emotional well being of teachers has been on my mind (see my last blog) lately. This is no joke. Teacher stress is real and, not surprisingly, the topic has been getting lots of press. Key findings of a [recent research brief from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) show:

- Forty-six percent of teachers report high daily stress, which compromises their health, sleep, quality of life, and teaching performance.
- When teachers are highly stressed, students show lower levels of both social adjustment and academic performance.

I don’t need research and pie charts to know that teacher stress is real and destructive. The teacher who feels like she’s dying is the teacher who took over for me when I left my teaching position a decade ago and moved into a counseling role. I was that dying teacher, so consumed and overwhelmed with grading, lesson planning, and students misbehaving. I was miserable at school and even more miserable when I brought all my worries home. I’d been teaching for 13 years at that point. Why couldn’t I

figure it out? Why did I feel so incompetent? Why was it so hard to breathe?

Looking back through the lens of mentoring now, I see what could have been. I see the “baptism by fire,” which I endured and barely survived, was an ineffective method of indoctrination after a mere one semester of unpaid student teaching. I had no structured support in my first years, thus had not developed effective strategies that would have helped me cope with the multiple stressors.

Further findings from the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation research brief](#) indicate:

- Interventions on the organizational or individual level, or those that reach both, can help reduce teacher stress by changing the culture and approach to teaching.
- Programs for mentoring, workplace wellness, social emotional learning, and mindfulness are all proven to improve teacher well-being and student outcomes.

Fortunately Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s +50 hour requirement exists to help inspire teachers in their first years to begin on a path of creative risk-taking and true professional growth. Since the state acknowledges and research supports that the most significant gains in teacher effectiveness happen in the first 3-5 years, this is an essential time for targeted supports to kick in. It never jumped out at me before now, but I appreciate how the department of education points out in the statement of intent of the additional mentoring hours that they be “aligned to the needs of the novice rather than broad initiatives at the district level.” We need to differentiate our mentoring practices, especially after the first year of orienting teachers to our schools, since we not only have differing skill sets and personality styles, we have brand-new-fresh-out-of-college teachers, new-to-the-district-not-new-to-profession teachers, and career changers.

Mentoring in Action offers three great options for novice teachers to complete the +50 hour requirement: the *Maintaining your Balance* course, Group Mentoring guidance, and/or independent reflection. Ideally, these options will help teachers become more self-aware, more collaborative, and more purposeful in their work for the ultimate benefit of their students. Ideally, we will help our teachers in their early years to develop strategies that will prevent them from ever feeling like they're dying but to help them sustain the feelings of vitality and worth.