


# Being well

**Five steps to finding  
balance in your  
professional life**





IN THE BUSYNESS OF THE NEW SCHOOL DAY, WEEK, TERM OR YEAR, THE FIRST CASUALTY CAN SOMETIMES BE YOUR OWN WELLBEING.

**DEB FERGUSON** EXPLAINS FIVE EASY STEPS TO BUILD YOUR RESILIENCE AND HELP YOU TO CONTINUE BEING WELL.

YOUR PILE OF MARKING IS GETTING bigger, you have reports to write, parent-teacher interviews looming and planning for next year as well as plenty of classes still to teach. You feel wrung out and worn down wondering how you'll fit it all in. Somehow despite the odds you always do but there are long hours and sleepless nights. Then at last it's holidays. A time of bliss, maybe, doing as you please, sleeping late and indulging.

In no time, however, you can expect to be back at work, although you know you can return with a refreshed attitude, feeling rested and ready for the challenges of a new year. Your sense of humour will have returned, you'll have your energy back and you can expect to get things done without too much drama.

Right now, though, you're anticipating the long summer break, when your life will feel more balanced, when you can stop, take stock, gain a clearer perspective.

There's a pattern in all this, if you hadn't noticed, of boom and bust, term and term break. Sure, the balance you gain during holidays is important, but it can be part of the problem if it evaporates in the busyness of the new school day. When life gets busier, our energy wanes and the things we did easily earlier become harder. Often it's our sense of humour that's the first to go.

There are demands from every part of the school, from students, leaders, parents and colleagues, which can become overwhelming. When that happens our wellbeing suffers, manifesting itself both physically and mentally. We may feel back pain, headaches, low energy or a general grumpiness. Life just becomes harder to manage, our immune system becomes depleted through stress and we

become victims to every bug that is going around.

Does this sound familiar?

Valuing the importance of our wellbeing is the key to making our life easier and healthier. When we are fit and positive we make better choices, are more engaged and productive, and have more fun. Building resilience by investing in ourselves and being responsible for our own wellbeing is crucial when times are tough, but how do we do this when we are tired, stressed and just don't have the time for it?

The key is finding a balance, which is about more than finding a balance during holidays. A balanced life is related to having control of our lives. When life is in balance, when we have control of our own lives, we feel strong and resilient, and daily conflicts are easier to cope with.

The reality, however, is that our lives often get out of balance as we respond to other people's agendas, causing stress. The stress that develops works in the same way that the steam trapped in a pressure cooker causes the internal temperature to rise, raising the boiling point and the pressure until it will burst if we don't release it. The damage, if we don't release it and things explode, is to our wellbeing, energy for life and healthy relationships.

Finding and maintaining a balance requires us to recognise how other people's agendas often determine what we *do*: it's important to realise that we have the power to determine how we *feel*. This is critical for our wellbeing and can be demonstrated each day when others try to 'get at us.' We all have the power to determine how we respond to what happens to us. We can choose to be either positive or negative in our responses.

Maybe a student is causing you stress, or a colleague is perpetually difficult. In schools, there are lots of different people with different personalities, operating according to lots of different moods resulting from lots of different experiences, who act in ways that determine how you act and react on a daily basis.

All those different people can, if you let them, tip you out of balance and erode your wellbeing.

That is going to happen, but you can be prepared for it. Prevention is the key. That's why developing a resilient attitude helps us deal with the difficult times. Being aware of the risk to your wellbeing is the first step.

There are lots of things you can do to build your resilience. You can train your mind just like you train your body. This does take time but it's worth the investment. Becoming aware and deciding to take control of your life is both a powerful and addictive force.

The first step to toughen up, and get smarter and stronger in the mind gym, is to assert yourself. People aren't mind readers, so you need to let them know clearly what you want, when and in what way. Misunderstandings are a common form of frustration in schools, which usually come about because we haven't clearly communicated our expectations and our needs. Letting people know clearly what you want, when and in what way can be done easily so potential risks are nipped in the bud. When you act in an honest, timely and transparent manner, other people know where you stand.

Challenging negativity is a powerful second step in promoting wellbeing. Most of us, when faced with conflict, rehearse again and again the thoughts and actions that occurred in the past, a practice in which most of us find ourselves caught in a downward spiral that leads to blame, either of another person or ourselves. The problem with negativity is that it's easy and leaves us feeling safe in our comfort zone, but at the price of frustration, dissatisfaction and a sense of powerlessness. Challenging that negative blame game requires that we respond positively to conflict.

Some of us find that easier than others. It's worth remembering that, whether we like it or not, conflict is a natural part of a working day. When it isn't managed, it can be very stressful and emotional, drain-

ing us of the vital energy we need for all aspects of our lives. When we build the skills of assertion, being positive and not blaming, we can focus on the possible solutions to conflict.

We can challenge negativity by working towards reconciliation. Of course, reconciliation doesn't always eventuate, so it's vital that we develop other strategies to manage conflict. We don't have to be best friends with all the people we work with, but we do have the responsibility to be professional. Developing the skill of empathy significantly contributes to resolving conflict. When we make the effort to see another person's point of view, we're on the way towards a collaborative solution.

It's worth remembering, however, that making the effort to see another person's point of view doesn't mean we have to breathe out for every oxygen depleter who comes our way. Oxygen depleters are people who thrive on negativity, choking us by finding fault whatever we do. Oxygen depleters can waste our time and therefore waste our lives. We can respond positively to conflict, seek reconciliation and empathise, but to deal with a particularly negative oxygen depleter we may sometimes need to revert to that first step and let colleagues know clearly that you need their support and help.

A third vital step is to set goals for ourselves. Setting goals helps us focus, gives us a sense of purpose and creates a driving force in our lives. In the busy, energy-sapping bustle of professional life time just seems to fly by. Before you know it another year of your life has gone. Most of us have two superbly well-developed skills: procrastinating and resisting change. We develop both of them in the hope that they'll address a fear. For our own wellbeing we need to remember that a fear is a goal in reverse. The good news is that by setting goals for ourselves we're actually addressing our fears, but the even better news is that we're doing that positively.

A key fourth step is to ensure our physical wellbeing. When we are fit and strong,

we have more energy and are more emotionally resilient. Exercise creates natural endorphins which help us in stressful times. Beyond that, by focussing on increasing our fitness, even if it's simply walking the dog, we're able to burn off steam and enjoy ourselves, too.

A fifth step is to manage our time more efficiently. This gives us greater control. For all the differences in wealth, all the variations in culture, all the conflicts across continents, there's one thing that everyone in the world shares: the same amount of time each day. Unless we stop, think and plan, we'll always be busy being busy. Effective planning helps us prioritise so that we can achieve more in less time, which means we can have more time and energy for those things that give us the most pleasure.

Being a powerful educator is closely related to being powerful in life. We can demonstrate our power by taking responsibility for our wellbeing and beginning to live a more energetic and purposeful life. As an educator that's part of the job. Not only will your health improve but your sense of humour, your relationships and your working life will improve, too.

What will you do today to begin to take control? ▀

*Deb Ferguson is an experienced educator and resilience expert, best known for her success in business and as an inveterate world traveller. She created the world's first ultraviolet swimsuit to protect children from harmful UV rays, has been awarded the Telstra Small Business Award, was invited onto the Reserve Bank's Small Business Advisory Panel, is busy on the lecturing circuit and runs training sessions for schools on ways to cope with increasing demands on professional educators.*

*LINKS: Contact Deb Ferguson by phoning 0410 212 001, emailing [deb@reddeb.com.au](mailto:deb@reddeb.com.au) or visiting [www.reddeb.com.au](http://www.reddeb.com.au)*

# Attention

# All Victorian Schools

You are invited  
to attend AIM  
workshops  
**FREE**

## AIM Professional Development Workshops

Ideal for:

- School principals
- AIM coordinators
- Teachers of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9
- Curriculum leaders



## AIM workshops are:

- free to schools
- delivered in 3 hour or full day formats
- delivered at locations near you
- delivered between Oct 22nd and Dec 12th 2007
- designed to cover:
  - » accessing your school's AIM data from the AIM Data Service
  - » an explanation of terms, definitions and report formats
  - » an explanation of the statistics generated by the testing
  - » recommendations for using data to improve teaching programs

To access workshop locations and  
times and to register online visit

<http://aim.acer.edu.au>

For further enquiries:  
**Margaret Taylor**  
Tel: (03) 9835 7103  
Email: [taylor@acer.edu.au](mailto:taylor@acer.edu.au)

VICTORIAN CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY



FEATURE – HEALTH & WELLBEING 7