

Breaks Aren't Just for Kids: Resetting the Educator Brain

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Begin at the end.

- + All day long, students and teachers are adapting to demands around them.
Our systems are always adjusting
- + Load builds when demand exceeds recovery
- + When load is too high, capacity goes down
- + Load management through reduced demands, improved regulation, or increased recovery

Keep in mind:

- + Taxed stress response system \neq character flaw



What is Allostasis?

- + **Allostasis** means “*stability through change.*”
 - It’s the body’s ability to adjust heart rate, breathing, attention, emotions, and energy to meet what’s happening **right now**.
- + Behind-the-scenes regulatory process—the body adjusts to meet changing demands
 - Brain constantly anticipating what’s needed & adjusts the body (predictive regulation)
 - Matching internal state to external demands
- + Body adjusts functioning to meet demand.

Allostasis is happening all day long.

- + Shifting attention between tasks (listening, reading, etc.)
- + Transitions (lining up, room changes)
- + Social navigation
- + Sensory input (lights, movement, noise)
- + Performance and evaluation
- + Emotional regulation
- + Rule-following and inhibition (waiting, raising hand, staying in seat)
- + Physical effort (writing, movement)

Let's imagine we're at the beach.

- + Body is continuously adjusting to the movement of the water to keep you afloat.

Calm water = small adjustments to maintain stability

Bigger waves = bigger adjustments to maintain stability

- + System is constantly trying to match what's happening around you so you can keep functioning.



Designed to keep head above water...but sometimes we go under.

- + When those adjustments add up faster than the system can manage or recover from, we experience wear and tear.
- + If the waves don't stop, we become fatigued, breathing erratic, smaller waves now feel bigger.
- + We need rest between the waves.
- + When we don't get it, our body starts to build **allostatic load**.

What is allostatic load?

- + **Load = frequency + intensity + duration WITHOUT recovery**
- + When allostatic load gets high, functioning shifts → less flexible, more reactive
 - Efficiency over flexibility
 - Protection over exploration
 - Immediate vs. thoughtful responses
 - Reduces access to attention, impulse control, and flexible thinking in the moment.



How it shows up in staff:

- + Narrowed thinking
 - Simpler, less effective responses
 - Difficulty concentrating
- + Less emotional availability
 - More task-focused, less relational (compliance over connection)
 - Skips check-ins
 - Miss emotional cues
 - Less warmth in tone
- + Low capacity to co-regulate/ difficulty staying calm when students escalate
 - Feeling overwhelmed when a student asks a simple question late in the day.
- + Bigger reactions and lower tolerance
 - Small disruptions (tapping, whispering, pencils dropping) feel *unbearably loud*.
 - The teacher notices their voice getting sharp more quickly than it used to.
 - Transitions that normally run smoothly suddenly feel chaotic and exhausting.

How it shows up in students/children:

- + Less seeking of help or connection
 - More avoidance or shutdown OR opposite (volume goes up)
- + Bigger reactions to smaller things
 - Minor frustration → hitting, yelling
 - Small change → meltdown
- + Emotional lability
 - Quick shifts
- + Difficulty with transitions
- + Impulsivity
 - Blurts out, runs, interrupts
 - Knows rule, but doesn't follow in moment
- + Attention struggles
 - Forgetful, distracted
- + Increased sensory sensitivity
 - Noise, touch can be overwhelming

Higher baseline stress = lower stress threshold

- + Allostatic load doesn't just change behavior; it **lowers** the threshold for activation.

Allostatic load = how close you are to the edge

Flipping your lid = falling off

- + Can have high allostatic loads w/o lid flip
- + Can flip lid with low load during a very intense moment

- + When load stays high over time, lid flips become more frequent, happen faster, and take longer to recover from.

Flipped Lid or Too long at Sea?

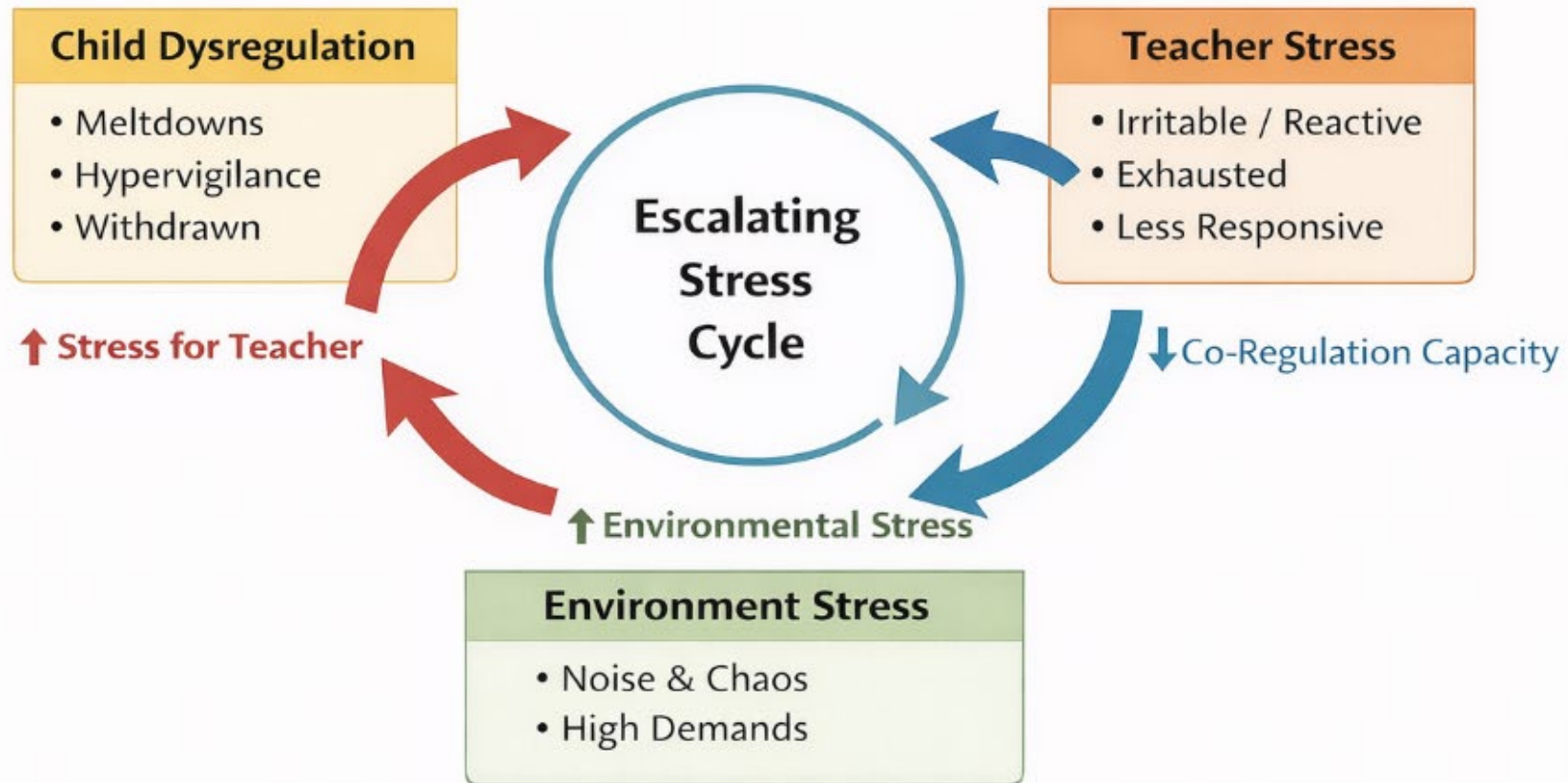
- + Flipping your lid describes a state-based, moment-in-time shift in brain functioning (acute, state-dependent, & sudden).
 - A single wave that knocks you off balance
 - PFC goes partially or fully offline, lower brain takes over.
 - Behavior becomes more reactive, impulsive, or shut down.
- + Allostatic load describes cumulative wear-and-tear on the body and brain from repeated stressors or input.
 - Being in rough water for a long time without rest.
 - Stress systems are activated too often or too intensely.
 - Repeated waves add up, and baseline arousal shifts **up** over time.
 - It's a shorter path from trigger to reaction.

From Regulation to Protection

- + When demands exceed available regulatory capacity, the nervous system shifts from regulation to protection.
- + **At some point, it's not about skill anymore, it's about capacity.**
- + Lack of capacity in the face of unpredictable or unending demands can present as a **threat**.
 - The lid can flip to try and help us survive it.
- + Then, we adapt to it--*"I've been in rough water all day. I'm going to assume the next wave is bad too."*

How load builds across a day:

The Classroom Stress Loop



Back to the water:

- + Waves = demands
- + Staying afloat = regulation
- + Shore = recovery

If the waves get **too big for too long** and we can't reach shore, our capacity for staying afloat goes down.

- + Connection, regulation, and attention require capacity.
- + When load is high, we have less of it.

Check in and remember:

- + When you see changes in functioning, it's worth asking:
 - Is this about this moment or is my system under load?
 - How many demands have stacked up today? Have I had any real reset time?
 - Would this normally bother me this much?
 - Do I need support? A pause? Lower demands?
 - Do I need to solve this or stabilize first?
- + When knocked by waves, the answer isn't always "swim harder"…
 - It's to get to shallower water and take a break.
 - Sometimes, we need help to get there.

Trying harder isn't the solution. Changing the conditions is.

1. Reduce Demands (make waves smaller)

- + Predictable routines (visual schedules)
- + Smooth transitions (warnings, visuals, countdowns)
- + Break tasks into smaller parts
- + Reduce unnecessary sensory input (noise, clutter, lights)
- + Slower pace or intentional energy (waddle like a penguin)
- + Clarify expectations (less ambiguity)
- + If it can wait, let it wait.
- + Delay consequences until regulation returns
- + Repair after: *"That was hard. Let's reset."*

Quick note

Regulation

- + Used during activation
(in the wave)

Recovery

- + Helps reset the system
once we're out of the
immediate moment (used
between waves)



2. Support Regulation—what we do in the wave.

- + Simplify demands—emphasize effort over perfection
- + Pause non-essential tasks
- + Literally move slower--slow movements, speech, lower tone
- + Turn body slightly sideways
- + Validate/label: *“Your body looks overwhelmed”, “It’s loud in here. I’m feeling overwhelmed.” “I’m really frustrated; I’m going to slow this down.”*
- + Sensory grounding (immediate)
- + Provide physical space or proximity, based on the person’s need
- + Offer simple choices (sit/stand, quiet corner, water)

- + **It’s hard to recover if you’re still in the wave.**
- + **Regulate first, then recovery can work to bring us closer to baseline.**

3. Increase Recovery--get to dry land and rest between waves

Built-in OR Spontaneous Micro-Resets:

- + Hands on desk, slow breath together/finger breaths
- + Push against wall
- + Play doh!
- + Whisper to your water or Wail at your water
- + Look out window and notice blue items
- + Short stretch/yoga
- + Short inhale, long exhale or Stomp, Stomp, Blow
- + Cold hands = Cooler heads
- + Mentally say to self, "Move slower. There is time."
- + Unclench jaw and shake it out (Shake your sillies out)
- + Pose and sit like a statue
- + Repair after dysregulation

Protect capacity, not just endurance.

1. Reduce chronic stressors

Clear expectations and roles

Minimize constant multitasking

Limit last-minute changes

Adequate behavioral support structures

Respect protected planning time

2. Increase recovery opportunities

Built-in breaks

Reasonable workloads

Encouragement to use sick days

Boundaries around after-hours communication

3. Strengthen adult co-regulation

Team problem-solving

Peer support and check-ins

Shared responsibility during crises

Administrators modeling regulation

4. Normalize nervous-system language

"My system is overloaded"

"Let's slow this down"

"We need recovery, not fixes"

Shift from blame to biology

5. Support meaning and connection

Recognition of effort

Autonomy in teaching

Purpose-driven work

Opportunities for joy and creativity



Takeaways

- + Stress responses are adaptive.
- + **Lack of recovery** creates load.
- + Supporting adult regulation directly supports student regulation & interrupts the loop.
- + Prioritize changing conditions whenever possible and use coping/regulation for the waves you can't avoid.

Thank you for showing up for kids with care and effort, even on hard days.

+ The work you do matters.