

Five Powerful Attitudes for Maintaining Your Sanity and Peace of Mind

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What is it experienced teachers know that seem to save their sanity and allow them to go home less weary and war torn than do new teachers? Schools of education inspire us to meet the needs of every child, to understand the value of cooperative learning, to consider the impact of poverty, abuse, and neglect on classroom performance, and to be able to compare and contrast theorists and classroom management approaches. Missing, however, from most teacher training programs is a class on attitudes and approaches for maintaining your sanity (and possibly your marriage!) while with all good intentions you are trying to meet those needs and understand the pressure of societal problems on your students. I am not casually dismissing the fallout of society's ills on our schools. Rather, I am suggesting that teachers are a precious commodity and that those who succumb to burnout or depression aren't able to contribute much. Consequently, I would, like to suggest five powerful attitudes that will contribute to your emotional health, to your peace of mind, and to your enjoyment as a teacher. These are some of the sanity secrets experienced teachers know and practice.

Sanity Rule #1: "Never Assume"

You have spent the last half of your lunch break laying out the newspaper and the special art paper. You have the liquid starch and powder paints ready. There are the paper towels and sink cleanser for cleanup. You feel ready for that lesson in finger painting that was so successful last year. Your eager second graders are lined up outside your door, anxious to get started. What fun! You assume they remember the rules of such a project. You painted just two weeks ago, after all. Rules like "Don't carry paint across the carpeted room," "Don't wipe your hands on the shirt of the kid in front of you," "Don't fight, shove, or push," or "Don't surround the teacher with your painty little hands all grabbing for attention" were discussed thoroughly last time. Of course they will remember.....

After school as you angrily scrub paint spots from your clothes and the carpet and apologize with embarrassment to your resentful janitor (who plans to turn in a report with your name all over it)--you are feeling frazzled and exhausted beyond belief. You vow you will NEVER allow children to paint again! While you are weeping bitter, disappointed tears, the lesson of the paint fiasco presents itself: NEVER ASSUME. Never assume students know what you expect and how they are to behave. What seems perfectly logical and reasonable to you is an experience in amnesia or hope for a rowdy social event to students. So before you attempt an activity that requires particular behaviors on their part, before you take 130 hormonal middle school students on the bus to the museum, or paint that mural, or perform a play for the parents, spend time going over all procedures and expectations. Your chances for a successful, happy experience for all (including yourself) will increase dramatically.

Sanity Rule #2: "Reflect"

Ask experienced teachers to tell you their most "memorable" war story, and although it may involve a situation over which they had little control (like that time the child threw up in the classroom on a day when it was too cold and rainy outside for an impromptu P.E. lesson and the janitor was unavailable--he was probably hiding in that little secret room he has), more often it was a matter of misplaced trust or a lack of foresight. Lessons that "bomb" happen to the best of us. How do we get past our embarrassing lack of judgment on those days? We pull ourselves together and we REFLECT. Why did that lesson go wrong? Lack of planning? Timing? What should I have done differently? Write it out and put your self-flagellation with the lesson's file of directions and cute little handouts. Reflecting is what we need to do because we forgot Rule #1: Never Assume.

Sanity Rule #3: Anticipate Problems

If you are determined to go through with your lesson plan to make paper mache animals the day you got the word an earthquake drill is planned "sometime" during the day, you can count on it--the screaming alarm will sound at the very moment 34 students are up to their elbows in paste and little pieces of sticky newsprint! It never fails. Anticipating problems means you know not to do a major lesson on fractions on Halloween to a roomful of monsters, fairy godmothers, and *Snoopys*. You postpone any request that the principal do you a big favor when you spot that

parent who regularly threatens law suits storming out of the office, murder in his eyes!

Anticipating means you develop a sensitivity to students whose interest and attention have begun to fade and who REALLY NEED to stand up or sing a song with lots of motions. Or it's time to transition to the next subject. Anticipating is similar to that ability mothers of two year olds know well. They spring into action, removing the vase or the box of opened Cheerios *before* the upset and the mess. For teachers, it's the sudden restlessness and shifting in seats or looking out windows that cues us. Anticipate what could be next--then adjust accordingly.

Sanity Rule #4: Don't put up with...

On those days it seems student behavior is out of control--all day long, when you feel tempted to scream at them for not following the rules and it feels as though they are ganging up on your sanity--and winning the match--on those days you are probably "putting up with..." When the level of whining about being forced to do any homework at all is escalating and you aren't sure about your right to demand anything beyond those cute lessons involving M & M's, group projects, or playing Social Studies "Jeopardy," you are "putting up with." They are unhappy and put upon that actual work is being requested and they are letting you know of their displeasure. You can tell you have begun to "put up with" by your own frustration and anger gauge. You see them suddenly as unappreciative and fickle--after all you have done for them. You are sure your blood pressure has hit a new high. You begin making plans to take a day off to spend alone, overeating and overshopping. You wish upon them the meanest substitute available.

This is a cycle most of us go through. Out of exasperation, irritation and that "last straw" determination, we go back to the basics, the rules, our expectations about the work and the cooperation we expect. We stop the constant entertainment and put on our "Don't mess with me" face. And then it happens—every time. The room gets quiet and they worry that they pushed you too far. They begin to pull out all their respect, politeness, and cooperative attitudes. Little notes (decorated with hearts and flowers) appear mysteriously on your desk proclaiming their adoration and their apologies. Then it comes to us what we have repeatedly learned and relearned. When you start putting up with unacceptable behavior, you are miserable; and when you are miserable, you are not giving out much more than reprimands, sour looks, and irritation. Save yourself and your sanity. Save them the insecurity. Don't put up with...

Sanity Rule #5: Give yourself a break

You are allowed to make mistakes (and learn from them), to be less than Mary Poppins or Mother Teresa in patience and generosity, and to have a plain old teacher directed lesson on days when the thought of listening to students doing "group work" makes your hair stand on end. You are allowed to be human. Teaching is made up of great days and occasional horrendous ones, but most days are less extreme. Teachers demand more of themselves than any group I know. It's a profession that never allows you to feel you accomplished everything you planned for the day. It's a job that seldom lets you know you made a lasting difference in a child's life. If you have done your best, assume your students benefited and learned. And on those days you were sleep deprived and cranky, remind yourself that children are really quite forgiving—especially when you admit your imperfections. Give yourself a break from the tyranny of self-judgment and the drive to demand more of yourself than can be done in three lifetimes. Give yourself a break and remind yourself regularly of what you *have* accomplished with your students. View failure as a growth opportunity--yours and theirs alike. Give yourself a break.

Teachers are about the hardest folks I know--but they are not unbreakable. We owe it to ourselves and to those we serve to maintain our emotional health. Start with these five basic sanity rules, and you'll be on your way! Then add your own.