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## Calming End-of-Year Stress

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# Calming End-of-Year Stress

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For many teachers and students, nearing the end of the school year can be a time of mixed feelings, sometimes including fear and anxiety. Students who walk through our doors with what [Dr. John Seita and Dr. Larry Brendtro](#) call "family privilege" look forward to time with friends and family, summer outings, and a freer schedule. These students are entering summer break "feeling felt and accepted" within their home environments. Their secure attachment with caregivers allows for expression, mistakes, and freedom to explore their self. Family privilege is defined as an invisible package of assets and pathways that provide us with a sense of belonging, safety, unconditional love, and spiritual values.

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Family privilege has little to do with financial privilege -- there are many alienated, disconnected, and lonely children from traditional upper-middle- and middle-class families who may lack emotionally positive climates within their home environments. Disconnected and mistrustful youth, whose experience of a school and classroom culture was an island of stability supporting their emotional and social needs, find the end of the school year frightening and stressful. Classrooms that nurture social-emotional growth and expression create a kind of family privilege, and when summer break becomes a reality, these students can feel an escalation of end-of-school-year stress.

In preparing to write this post, I sought to compare my own experiences with those of many other educators who've observed this mounting stress in their students. These observations come from grades K-12 in public and private schools, and the anxieties and fears discussed below are vast, varied, and personal.

## Reasons for Concern

Those students struggling with upcoming changes may wonder:

- Will I be promoted to the next grade level?
- Will I pass all these tests? And if I don't, what then?
- Who will my new friends be?

At a more visceral developmental level, these worries loom:

- When will there be a next meal, a next hug, a kind word, encouragement, and a next safe place?
- Will I be accepted in new class environments?
- Who can I trust? And how will I know?

These students may begin acting out, appear less focused, and possibly shut down. Also, to adults, youthful fear and anxiety may look like anger.

Angry and defiant youth often have a significant history of unpleasant and painful experiences with other adults. Once humans perceive a reason to mistrust, we're neurobiologically wired to protect and defend. These students often mistrust adults, acting out or projecting negative emotion and shame with caring adults who stay connected, even during school or classroom conflicts and behavioral concerns. Love is the youth's powerful need, and many educators consistently provide for this need, so the thought of leaving these caring relationships can be terrifying.

At another level, secondary students wonder and worry about year-end exams, portfolios, and the expectations of summer jobs, graduation, and adult responsibilities -- pressures thrust upon them over just a few months. Many high school seniors will be living on their own following graduation, possibly working an 8-5 job or moving to a new place for college, and their worlds will shift with unknown responsibilities.

Under significant stress, the brain becomes hyper vigilant, hyper focused, reactive, and emotional. When stress hijacks the emotional limbic brain, we are left in a survival response as the prefrontal cortex shuts down and turns off. The frontal lobe allows us to think through choices and consequences, plan, prioritize, problem solve, and emotionally regulate with focused attention. When a continuous stream of fear, anxiety, and worries seizes our frontal lobes, our ability to think through experiences and challenges is compromised.

Teacher stress at the end of the school year intermingles and coexists with student stress. For many teachers, this time of year is so trying because of all the testing and the constant requests to differentiate, incorporate school projects, conference with parents and students, keep engagement high, and attend to students' emotional needs. It can feel simply overwhelming! Teachers walk into summer break with many of the same questions as our vulnerable students. We too wonder:

- Will they have enough to eat?
- Will there be anyone home at night to tuck them in?
- Will they hear kind words?
- Will they have any structured time or supervision?
- What will happen the day after they walk out of our classroom?

## 5 Strategies for Closure and Transition

Below are strategies to hopefully lessen everyone's perceived stress while easing the transition to a magnanimous unknown. These strategies are for all grade levels.

### 1. Symbolic Gifts

A talisman symbolizes ritual and ceremony, which our brains enjoy. A token such as a coin, stone, shell, or any object shared with another says that our relationship doesn't end -- it simply changes. This would be a great resource for transition as students leave our classes knowing that we'll always be a part of their journey even if we don't see one another daily.

### 2. Photos and Affirmations

We all loved photo booths when we were young. Create an affirmation photo booth in the last weeks of class with a [positive affirmation](#) written on a post-it or index card and a picture of you and your students to be embraced long after the school year ends.

### 3. Planting and Nurturing

Metaphorically, a connected school always focuses on planting flowers instead of pulling weeds. During the final weeks of school, design a ritual seed-planting celebration. With paper cups, soil, and seeds, students can water, provide sunlight, and take care of their small plants all summer long knowing that they've been the caregivers in a project connecting the symbolism of the plant to their own lives. When we care for ourselves, we grow and flourish. When we care for another, he or she grows and flourishes.

### 4. Remember to Breathe

Calming the brain's stress response is critical to positive emotion, clarity of thought, and emotional regulation. When we use [breathing or focused attention exercises](#) to quiet the emotional center of our brains where fight, flight, and fear reside, we are activating neural circuits in the brain that strengthen the flow of oxygen and glucose through the prefrontal cortex. Each day, invite students to join you in a guided or breathing focused attention practice.

### 5. The Family Tree

A healthy, emotionally connected classroom mimics a family that embraces family privilege. In these final weeks of school, create a family tree within the classroom or school where branches symbolize individual students and their strengths, contributions, and successes within the classroom. Small groups of students could represent larger branches, but all are connected. When the tree's leaves change colors or when its branches bud with new life, these events hold the connection and stories of all students who have been a part of this tree of life. Whether you create this symbol with an actual tree or from school art supplies, give your students a part of their branch to take home.

How do you help students face their end-of-year anxieties? Please share in the comments below.