

OVERWHELMED?

Finding a Balance with Help from EIP

The Early Intervention Program for Teachers (EIP) is a supportive service staffed by registered occupational therapists who are available to help NSTU members who are experiencing illness or injury. The following is a true account of one member's experience with the EIP. We know she is not alone in her struggle to meet all the demands at school while maintaining a healthy, balanced life outside of work, and appreciate her sharing her story.

...And the Bell Rings

The bell rings at 3 p.m. and in a flash the kids sprint to the door. As the m  le of the day gives way to peace, I retreat to my classroom wondering how I can possibly love something so much and yet have so much difficulty managing. But I don't really have this time to think right now. I have notes on student behaviours and calls home to make. I have arrangements to make for this week's guest speaker. I have photocopying to do for tomorrow. I should attend one of the committees I offered to be on that I have not gone to yet. I haven't even gotten to the dreaded emails today. The multitude of messages adds even more to my list: Requests to get work together for one student who will be out of school on a trip for two weeks and another who has been placed on in-school suspension; reminder of the upcoming SAC meeting, the computers in the lab are down, and the library will be closed tomorrow. The NSTU Monday memo is also there with important dates and reminders; and then the kicker: Oh My! I almost forgot – again. There is a staff meeting today at 3:10 p.m. Then my cell phone rings. It's my daughter asking me for a drive that I had promised her last week. I scoff at her for calling me at work, but, out of guilt, I make a promise that I will comply, just to hang up the phone. Any minute now, the janitor will be rolling by to collect refuse and make small talk with me. I try hard to focus on the task at hand, hoping that he will not see that I am on the precipice of a mighty tear fall. I need to clear my mind from the frenzy of the day and prepare my thoughts for my five classes tomorrow.

Each day I hope I will be better prepared for my lessons, I will manage the appalling student behaviours in class and I will be better organized. I just have to be! There is no way to do this job unless I am. I begin shouting at myself for my being so inept. "I love this job" I claim, as if telling myself something I did not already know. Why can't I do it better? It's been four years! Surely this has to get easier. I think of the

heap of professional development books I scan each night, as if some magic spell will be cast upon me. I look for ways to become the teacher who can prepare for every class, read resources, teach and reach minds, look after a family, and not even look tired. If only I could figure out how to do it. But right now I have more urgent things to do than to allow myself to think. Besides, I don't dare afford my emotions any surface time because I don't trust what they might do without my approval.

Tomorrow will be the first day of three in a row when I have no prep time. I have to make sure everything is done in advance because once that bell rings I'm "on the air," so to speak. No room for mistakes, no room for backing up to get to those things that might have been forgotten. I begin to feel guilty that those poor students are never going to get their tests back or play that game I promised them—unless of course I renege on my promise to my husband and children. "No" I say to myself, "I cannot do this again. I promised them too."

As I am trying not to become too weakened by my fatigue, I think about all the promises I have also made to myself. I promised to get involved in something besides school, not to talk "teacher talk" everywhere I go, to spend more time with my family and to spend time with friends (although I am starting to wonder if I actually have any left). "Yeah, sure I do", I tell myself. "I will just learn to multitask a little better." Lately, my usually supportive family has begun to question my sanity. I am forgetting all of my promises. I begin to ask myself: "How am I going to manage this career? Why does it seem like every other teacher can juggle all of these balls without difficulty and I feel like an avalanche will soon swallow me whole?"

Hurriedly, I open one more email before I rush off to the staff meeting. Angrily, I vow that I will not reveal once again that I am inept at managing my time by arriving late. This final email from the NSTU had better be worth the risk that I might be late for this staff meeting, and furthermore this better be useful. I mean really useful! Isn't the union something that just happens when I am not looking? Isn't it just something that is written between the covers of a little yellow book called a collective agreement? The Monday Memo opens. I scan the list of items and then I see it...

"The Early Intervention Program for Teachers... 'Are you struggling to manage at work? Is your health suffering such that you may need to take sick days? Are you



looking at returning to work after a period of sick leave? Are you uncertain how to manage your health along with everything else on your plate?' If you have answered 'yes' to these questions, you will want to know about the NSTU's Early Intervention Program for Teachers."

There it was, in black and white on my computer screen. Someone who may be able to help me answer some of the very questions I have been asking myself.

As I enter the library, the staff meeting is not yet in progress. I look about, wondering how these teachers can still find the energy for frivolous talk at the end of a long day. I search the crowd looking for the school's union rep. Later as the meeting ends, I hurry over to her to ask about this Early Intervention Program for Teachers. She admits she has little knowledge on the subject but encourages me to call the NSTU and ask for more information.

What seemed to me a move of defeat, the Case Coordinator with the Early Intervention Program (EIP), saw as a move of victory. Through my work with the EIP, I have been able to recapture the reason I became a teacher in the first place. Through their expert skills, my situation

was assessed and the right supports put in place to help me conquer the overwhelming sense of defeat. I was followed through a series of tough times and offered an array of services that I never even knew existed. The Program was quick to evaluate what I would need to do to carry on in my teaching career. Their quiet negotiation skills ensured that my health came first and that I was able to put balance back into my life as a mother, teacher, wife, friend and community member. My experience with the Early Intervention Program has made me realize that teachers who struggle in managing their health while performing the balancing act, have a network of partners who will be there from the morning school bell at 9 a.m. until well after the last bell rings at 3 p.m.

The Early Intervention Program for Teachers is available to ALL members of the NSTU.

October is National Occupational Therapy Month. For more information about Occupational Therapy or the Early Intervention Program for Teachers, please contact us at 1-800-565-6788, 477-5621 (local), or eip@nstu.ca.

did you KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at **Be_Well@nstu.ca**.

Please contact Erin at ekeefe@nstu.ca to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.



[From The Teacher, October 2009, Volume 48 Number 2, page 6   NSTU 2009]