



September 27, 2023

Putting a Helmet on Your Nervous System

Do you regularly wear a seat belt to protect your body in the event of a car accident? How about donning a helmet when you ride your bike or go skiing, to protect your head in the event of a fall? Do you consider a similar approach when it comes to your nervous system? Being prepared, and taking proactive steps to protect your psychological health and nervous system, can prevent or mitigate a possible crash!

Our Nervous System

Working in education, particularly as a Principal or Vice-Principal, is a cognitive, emotional, and complex job that is demanding, yet rewarding. To thrive, school leaders need to be self-aware and protect their health, including the well-being of our nervous system. The nervous system, led by the brain at 'headquarters', operates the complex circuitry that sends and receives messages from the central nervous system (our brain and spinal cord) to the rest of our body.

These nerve connections not only ensure that our body systems are operating as designed, but are also responsible for our automatic nervous system (ANS) that triggers our flight or fight response (our sympathetic nervous system) when we experience stress, or our rest and digest response, (parasympathetic nervous system) to help calm us and return our body back to homeostasis.

The Danger of Not Protecting Our Nervous System

Repeated firing of our sympathetic nervous system may be caused by stress, negative thoughts, or workplace psychological risks such as exposure to trauma, violence, or even bullying and harassment. Over time, repeated firing of this system results in the regular release of stress hormones such as cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine, which can damage blood vessels, increase blood pressure, and promote a buildup of fat. The long-term secretion of these substances is also associated with a variety of serious physical and mental health conditions, including:

- Anxiety, depression, and panic attacks
- Fatigue and insomnia
- Hyperglycemia (high blood glucose levels), which can lead to type 2 diabetes
- Hypertension (high blood pressure), which can lead to cardiovascular disease, strokes, and kidney disease
- Digestive issues
- Obesity, metabolic syndrome, and bowel disease

Keeping our Nervous System Calm

There are many ways to take care of our nervous system:

- Activating our parasympathetic nervous system to elicit our relax response including:
 - Deep abdominal breathing
 - Meditation
 - Focusing on a soothing word (such as 'peace' or 'calm')
 - Visualization of tranquil scenes
 - Repetitive prayer
 - Yoga, and tai chi
 - Spending time in nature
 - Massage
 - Playing with animals or children
 - Progressive relaxation
 - Stimulating our vagus nerve
- Physical exercise
 - Not only deepens breathing and helps relieve muscle tension, but also helps clear out stress chemicals
- Social Support

- Connecting with others
- Doing something you enjoy, such as your favorite hobby

The BCPVPA produced [this 6-minute video](#) entitled ***Putting a Helmet on Your Nervous System*** for our Amplification for Experienced School Leaders program. This video also provides tips on how we can protect and strengthen our nervous system so that we can support our well-being and perform well in our roles.

Taking care of your nervous system, including your sympathetic nervous system, will contribute to a healthy life where you will excel in the profession you love, and benefit from those things outside of work that bring you joy.

Sources:

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.