Coping with Stress/Anxiety to Maximize Professional Effectiveness

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School Name: Jackson Elementary School
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Background Leading to My Inquiry (Slide 2)

This is my second year as a principal of a K-4 elementary building, having previously served as an English teacher in a 9-12 high school building and a dean of students in a 5-6 intermediate building. As with most transitions, some amount of stress is inherent to the process of learning and acquiring new skills while also meeting a new group of staff and students. However, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on schools, I have found that my stress and anxiety levels about school-related items seem to be at an all-time high.

I have always been someone that reflects and dwells on the things that occur during the school day. In the past, I thought this a strength. When we shut down schools in the spring of 2020, it became difficult to see how I could effectively help my staff and my students navigate a world so different from the one we inhabited just weeks before. One item I could control was checking and promptly responding to communication. It was a small thing, but it was something I could do well, regardless of schools being shut down. However, as we planned for reentry in the summer and then began school in the fall, the compulsive checking and responding to communication was no longer necessary; I had other tasks that I could perform to be effective in my role as principal. By then, I had developed a habit that would not allow me to disengage from the day, as I was always thinking about what someone might say to me and what I might say in return, exacerbating any small stress or anxiety into a bigger issue, even if it otherwise would not have mattered much. Given how unique this school year has been due to COVID-19, this cycle of stress/anxiety only grew as needs shifted throughout the school year. As time went on, I felt that my stress and anxiety was negatively impacting my professional effectiveness, as I was getting distracted and upset over little things and ignoring the important things I needed and wanted to accomplish.

The Purpose of My Inquiry (Slide 3)

Therefore, the purpose of my action inquiry was to seek ways to control, limit, or eliminate stress and anxiety to increase my professional effectiveness as a principal.

My Wondering (Slide 4)

With this purpose, I wondered what changes I might implement in my life outside of school that might help me to reduce my stress and anxiety and thus increase my professional effectiveness when at school.

My Actions (Slides 5-6)

To begin, I spent some time reflecting on the last several years of my career. Specifically, I was trying to isolate times in which I have felt particularly proud of my professional performance, so that I could compare habits that I remember having at that time. As with many people, my habits, both good and bad, have shifted over the years. Through reflection, I noticed several things:

- Prior to being a principal, I do not remember compulsively checking my email when not at school.
- When I am exercising regularly, I am most satisfied with myself. However, I can remember several periods in which I thought I had developed the good habit of exercising regularly only to give it up when professional stresses began to increase. For example, I was exercising 5 or more days per week this summer and early fall before suddenly stopping.
- Almost every school year since my daughter was born, I begin the school year making healthy eating choices. Normally before the end of the first quarter, I begin to make poor choices, ordering fast food or picking up junk food on my way to work. Almost without fail, it escalates to a point that I make at least one poor meal choice each day.
- I have a habit of allowing my stress and anxiety over school-related items seep over into my relationship with my wife and children, often failing to be fully present in the moment.

After this, I spent some time reading articles on the Internet about various stress relief strategies. As I was formulating ideas for the project, the pandemic forced a three-week virtual reset of the schools in our corporation from Thanksgiving into Winter Break. Unfortunately, I had not settled on a data collection method prior to entering the virtual reset.

Next, I created a Google Form with various questions that would allow me to look at some of the possible variables affecting my stress and anxiety as it correlates with my self-perceived professional effectiveness. I also included a notes section so that it would make more sense for me later when I tried to analyze the data to keep straight the events.

Finally, as soon as I had come up with what I thought was a reasonable method of collecting, I began the project on Tuesday, December 8th. I continued to keep a daily log of data for 15 weeks (106 days), ending on Tuesday, March 23rd.

Data Collection (Slide 7)

My Google Form included the following questions:

- Date
- Please rate your stress level on this day (1-10 scale)
- Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day (1-10 scale)
- Please rate yourself as father/spouse/family member on this day (1-10 scale)
- Approximately how much sleep do you think you got last night?
- Did you exercise?
- What type of exercise did you do?
- Did you mediate?
- Did you paint?
- Did you play bass?
- Did you eat fast food today?
- Did you read today?
- What did you read?
- Approximately how long did you read?
- Approximately how much time did you spend with your wife/children?
- What model of instruction is the school offering currently?
- Was this a school day?
- Did you check email before 6am?
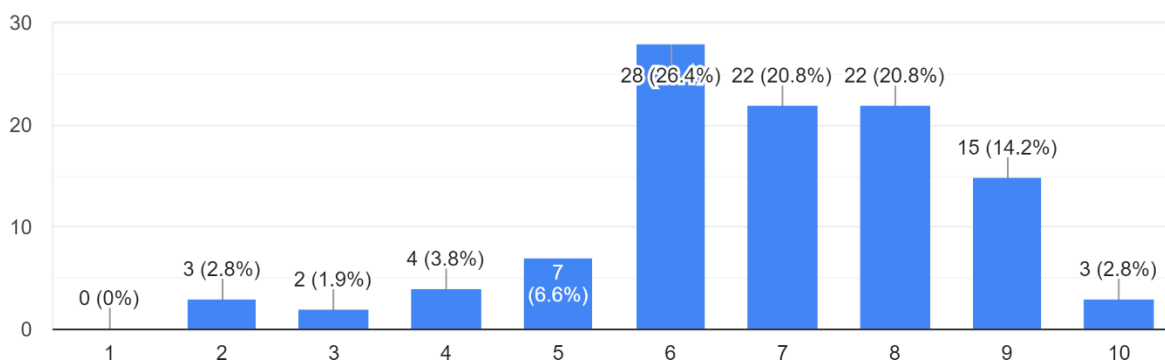- Did you check email after 8pm?
- Additional notes?

Using the Google Form allowed me a quick way to track my quantitative data. As the project ran its course, the space for additional notes allowed me to provide some narrative (qualitative) comments about my days that later helped me greatly in trying to understand my data.

My Data (Slides 8-12)

After I had collected all my data through the Google Form, I looked at ways to analyze it. Using the built-in functionality of Google Forms, I was able to generate some simple graphs to quickly access the quantitative data. For example, I was able to see that I tended to rate my stress level higher on the 1-10 scale more consistently than I did my professional effectiveness on the same 1-10 scale.
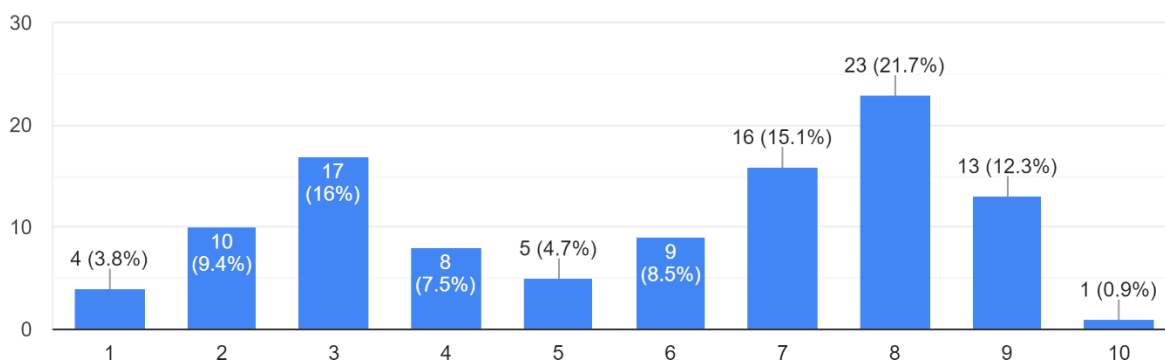
Please rate your stress level on this day.
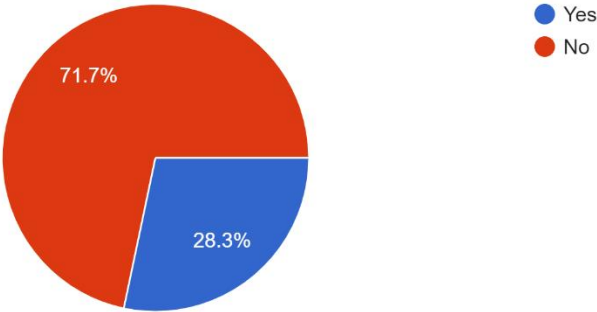
106 responses

Rating	Count (Percentage)
1	0 (0%)
2	3 (2.8%)
3	2 (1.9%)
4	4 (3.8%)
5	7 (6.6%)
6	28 (26.4%)
7	22 (20.8%)
8	22 (20.8%)
9	15 (14.2%)
10	3 (2.8%)

Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day.

106 responses

Rating	Count (Percentage)
1	4 (3.8%)
2	10 (9.4%)
3	17 (16%)
4	8 (7.5%)
5	5 (4.7%)
6	9 (8.5%)
7	16 (15.1%)
8	23 (21.7%)
9	13 (12.3%)
10	1 (0.9%)

To look at the relationship between the two, I moved the results to an Excel file to generate a line graph that combines both results. The initial result was a confusing mess; on non-school days, I often continued to rate myself as feeling more stressed and anxious than I did professionally effective, typically because I wasn't actively working on school-related items, but I was still thinking about them. To simplify matters, I removed weekends from my analysis. Thus, I ended up with the following:

Relationship between Stress and Professional Effectiveness

— Please rate your stress level on this day.

— Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day.
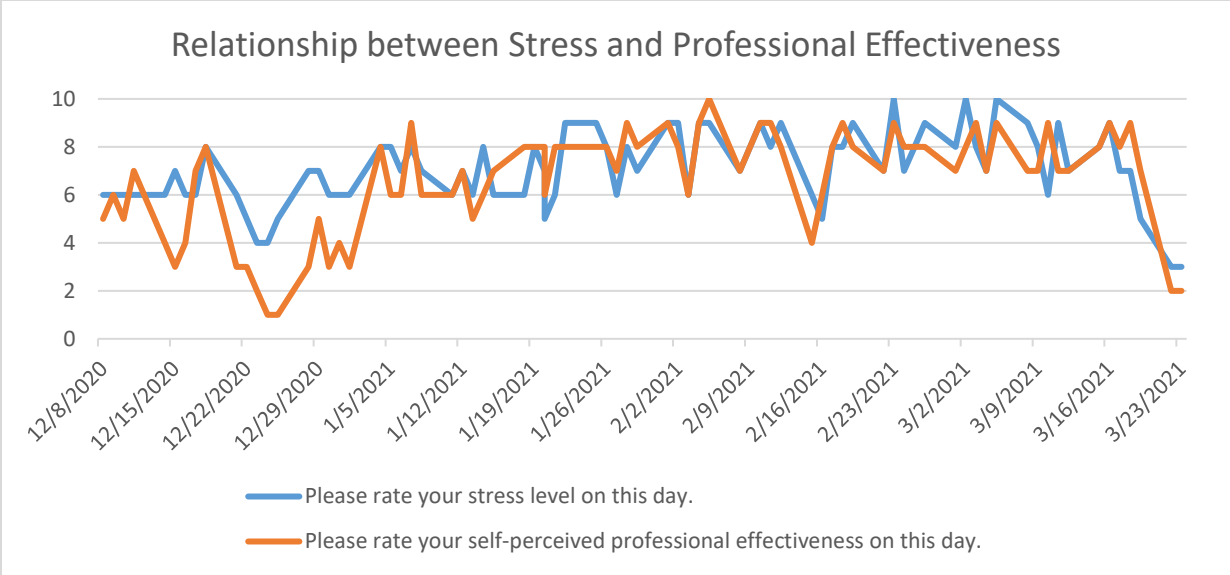
With the obvious exception of the last few weekdays of the project which coincided with Spring Break, there seemed to be a slight trend to view myself as more effective even as stress levels rose.
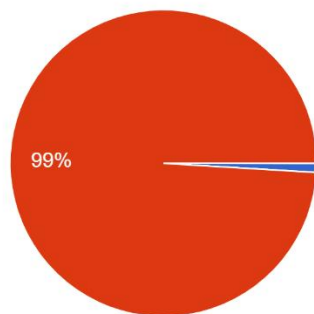
In terms of developing good habits or breaking new ones, the data was mixed.

Did you exercise?
106 responses

- Yes
- No

71.7%

28.3%

Did you meditate?

104 responses

Legend:
- Yes
- No

99%

Did you paint?

88 responses

Legend:
- Yes
- No

95.5%

Did you play bass?

87 responses

Legend:
- Yes
- No

89.7%

10.3%

Did you eat fast food today?

106 responses

Yes
No

74.5%

25.5%

Did you read today?

105 responses

Yes
No

61.9%

38.1%

Did you check email before 6am?

105 responses

Yes
No

39%

61%

Did you check email after 8pm?

105 responses

- Yes
- No

75.2%

24.8%
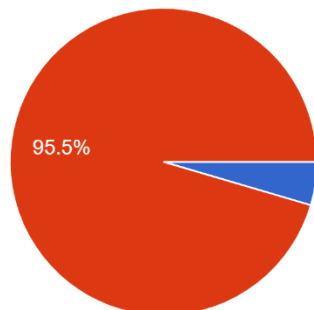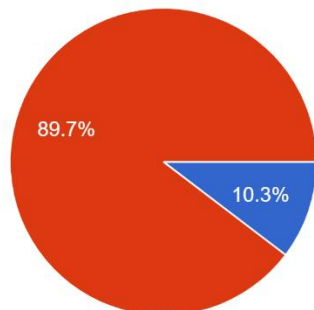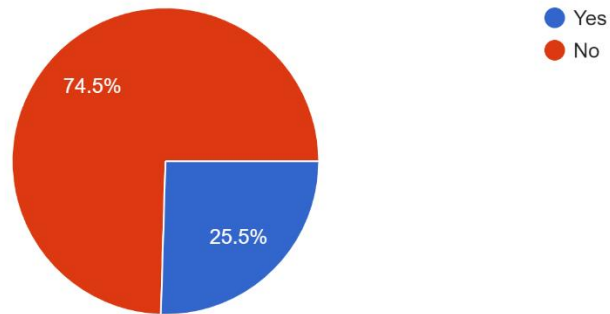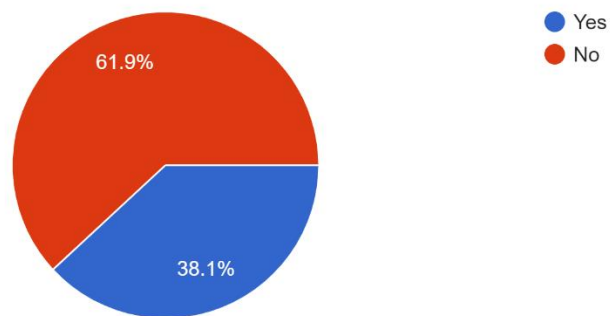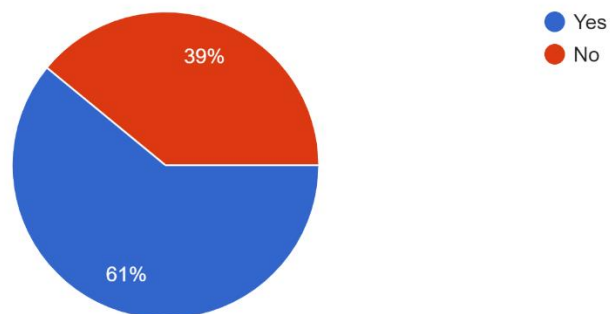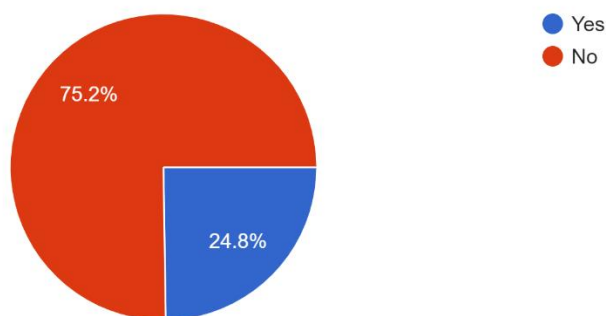
Exercise turned out to be a troublesome stress relief strategy, as I only exercised 28.3% of the days; this unfortunately, was influence somewhat by an episode of back spasms in late January that required medical attention. Some of my other stress relief strategies I rarely used, especially meditation, painting or playing a musical instrument. However, I did read for personal enjoyment on 40/106 days (38.1%). Surprisingly, despite often feeling I don't have any free time, on 13 of those days I read for 120 minutes or more. I finished seven non-fiction books over the course of the project and read parts of three more; this is more than I have read in a similar period probably since college.

I was largely able to limit the amount of fast food I consumed; whereas I was sometimes eating fast food every day of the week (100%) prior to the start of the project, I was able to reduce its frequency down to only 25.5% of total days.

In terms of compulsively checking email early in the morning or late at night, I was more successful stopping my nightly email checks post-8pm than I was stopping before 6am. In the morning, I was still checking email before 6am 61% of the time; in the evening I was checking after 8pm only 24.8% of the time.

In reading over my narrative comments, I noticed several trends that I had not originally intended to address through this project. Of the 106 days, I specifically mentioned having nightmares on 18 of them. I spoke about anxiety (19 times) and stress (18 times) far more often than I did about something being good (11 times) or happy (7 times). My narrative entries tended to be much more focused on frustrations and less focused on solutions. For example, on 12/18, I wrote, in part that the day was, "Probably the busiest and most stressful" one so far. On 1/22, I wrote that the "day spiraled on me quickly. Issues with poor behavior in 1st and KDG; suicidal ideation, too. Running on adrenaline all day, didn't stop for lunch, just wiped out emotionally by the time I got home. It was difficult to turn it off". However, by 3/18, I wrote, "Finally finished the classified evals and I am nearly done with the budgets. Feeling accomplished, but already the thoughts are shifting from the list of must finish items to what I have to do after Spring Break."

My Discoveries (Slide 13)

- Learning Statement One: Intentionally focusing on my stress and professional effectiveness helped to reframe how I viewed my days.
    - During the project, I found myself constantly comparing one day to the next, asking myself, "Am I really more stressed than I was yesterday?" or "What have you accomplished today that makes you feel proud of your effectiveness?" Based on the quantitative data, there was no major downward shift in my perceived stress/anxiety levels; applying a trend line to the data indicates that as stress rose, so did my perceived professional effectiveness. By being more intentionally reflective, I was at least more aware of the good in my professional day, even if the stress remained.
- Learning Statement Two: Attempting to implement too many changes simultaneously resulted in changing very little.
    - I should have more carefully targeted my choice of changes. Controlling the checking of email late at night was a relatively easy fix, commenting on 1/3 that I was "keeping email checks within normal limits." However, my scattered approach to finding stress relief was problematic, especially as I hadn't considered the impact of my strategies on others. For example, painting requires a great deal of time and setup that is difficult to do with young children at home; if I chose to play bass guitar, then I couldn't very well interact with anyone in the family; meditation just felt too strange. Some strategies were too isolating to be viable currently.
- Learning Statement Three: Reading is my most effective stress relief strategy, although its direct affect on professional effectiveness is difficult to discern.
    - Based on the amount of time invested (7 nonfiction books completed; portions of 3 more read), I returned more often to reading than anything else. It was something that I could carry with me and set down immediately to attend to family needs.

Where I Am Heading Next (Slide 14)

General Reflection:
I would like to have started my study prior to our virtual reset to have a better sense of my baseline measurements of stress/anxiety and self-perceived professional effectiveness. Although I found being more intentionally reflective to be enlightening, I should have considered more carefully what I would like to improve about myself before designing and beginning the project. I am particularly struck by the number of times I wrote about having nightmares; this is something I would like to have found a way to address.

Directions for The Future:
In the future, I need to shift my paradigm to focus more exclusively on the good portions of my days (What did I do effectively today?) and less on the negative (What did I not do well? What

might someone say to me tomorrow about something I did today?). I am particularly interested in uniting my reinvigorated interest in reading nonfiction with some professional interests that could be of benefit to me during my school day as I lead my building in new initiatives.

Bibliography (Slide 15)

Collingwood, J. (2016, May 17). The Power of Music To Reduce Stress. Retrieved December 1, 2020, from https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-power-of-music-to-reduce-stress#1

Frank, O. (2016, June 14). At Any Skill Level, Making Art Reduces Stress Hormones. Retrieved December 1, 2020, from https://drexel.edu/now/archive/2016/June/Art_Hormone_Levels_Lower/

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Coping with Stress/Anxiety to Maximize Professional Effectiveness

SAM MARSHALL

JACKSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Background Leading to My Inquiry

- 2nd year as elementary principal
  - Former English teacher in 9-12 high school and dean of students at 5-6 intermediate

- Always someone who dwells on the day's events and acquires poor habits (not exercising, eating unhealthy foods) during stressful times

- Developed habit of compulsively checking and responding to email during COVID-19 shutdown; professional concerns rarely leave my mind

- Given unique nature of the school year and its many changes (hybrid, in-person, virtual resets, roster/teacher changes, etc.), I felt stress/anxiety was interfering with what I wanted/needed to professionally accomplish

The Purpose of My Inquiry

Therefore, the purpose of my action inquiry was to seek ways to control, limit, or eliminate stress and anxiety to increase my professional effectiveness as a principal.

My Wondering

With this purpose, I wondered what changes I might implement in my life outside of school that might help me to reduce my stress and anxiety and thus increase my professional effectiveness when at school.

My Actions

Reflection:

- Email not an issue when only a teacher or dean
- I'm happiest when I exercise and eat well BUT I often give up both habits when stressed
- School stress often affects my relationships with my wife and children

Research on Stress Relief Strategies:

- Music can be helpful (Collingwood, 2016)
- Reading even for a few minutes can have a big impact (Scipioni, 2020)
- Meditation can have a profound impact (U.S. Army Research Laboratory, 2018)
- Creating art can reduce stress levels (Frank, 2016)

My Actions

- Created a Google Form
- Began data collection on Tuesday, December 8th, 2020
- Kept a daily log for 15 weeks (106 days), ending on March 23rd, 2020
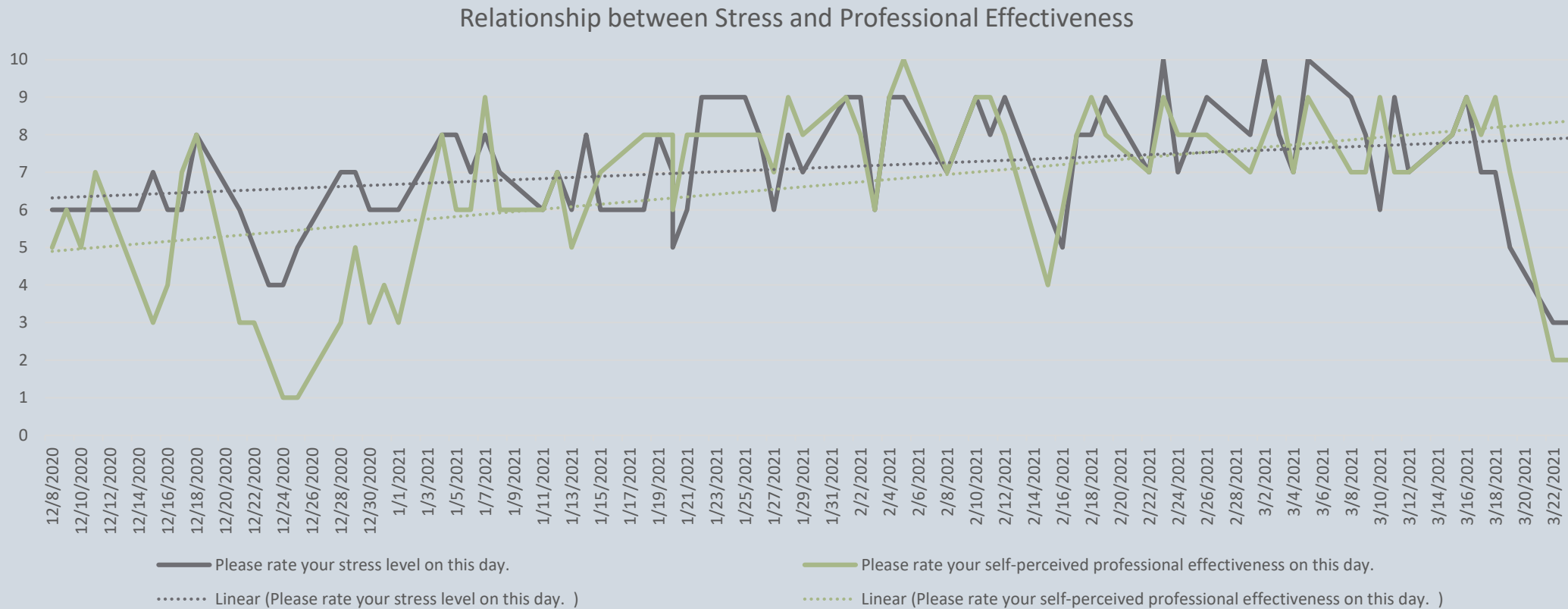
Data Collection (through Google Form)

Date	Please rate your stress level on this day (1-10 scale)	Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day (1-10 scale)	Please rate yourself as father/spouse/family member on this day (1-10 scale)	Approximately how much sleep do you think you got last night?	Did you exercise?
What type of exercise did you do?	Did you mediate?	Did you paint?	Did you play bass?	Did you eat fast food today?	Did you read today?
What did you read?	Approximately how long did you read?	Approximately how much time did you spend with your wife/children?	What model of instruction is the school offering currently?	Was this a school day?	Did you check email before 6am?
		Did you check email after 8pm?	Additional notes?		

My Data
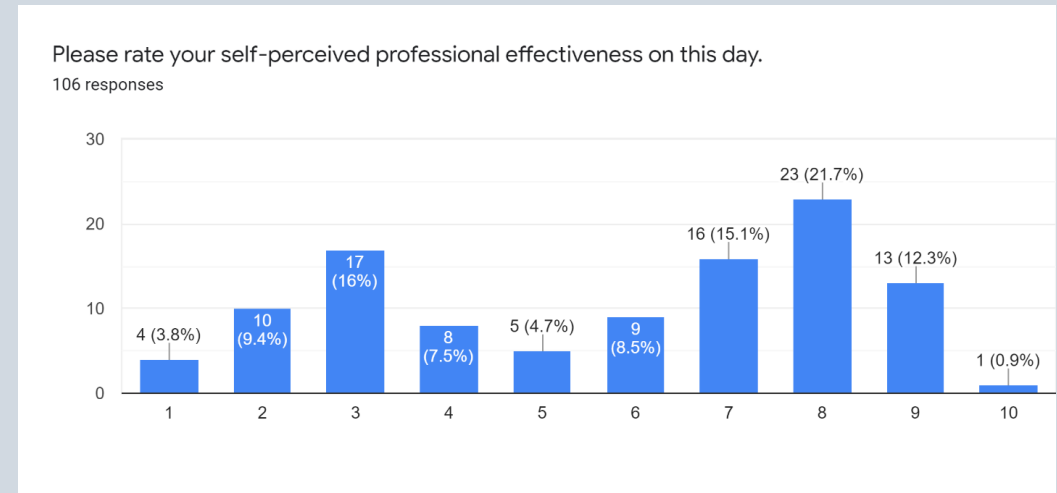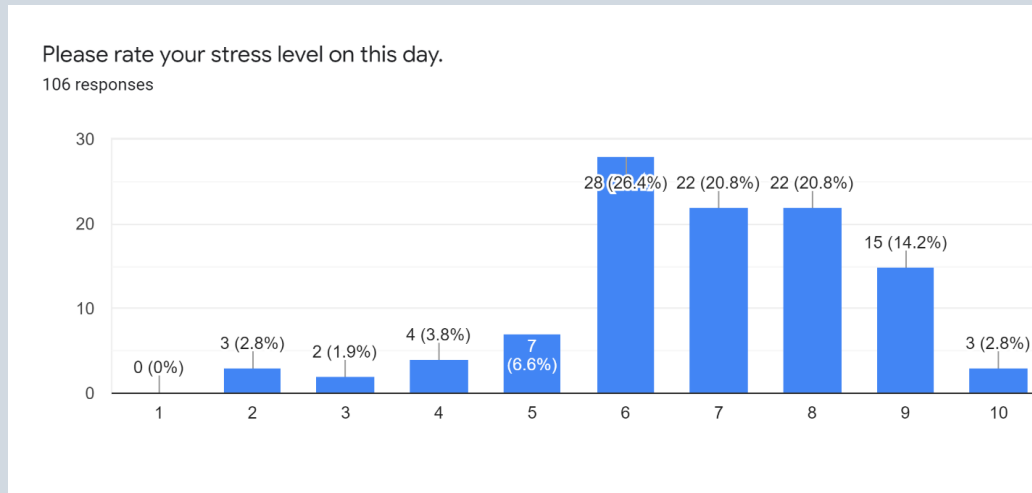
Raw data on stress levels and self-perceived professional effectiveness
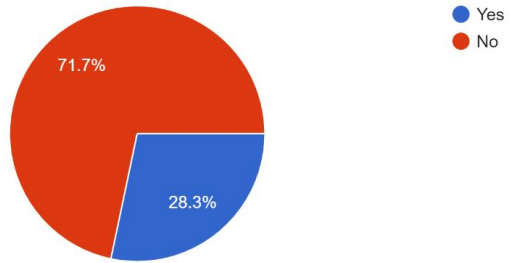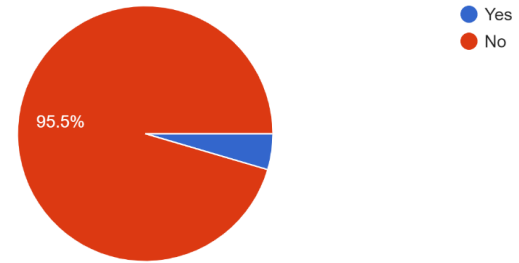
My Data

Relationship between Stress and Professional Effectiveness

Legend: Please rate your stress level on this day. — Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day. — Linear (Please rate your stress level on this day.) — Linear (Please rate your self-perceived professional effectiveness on this day.)

Data with weekends excluded and trendlines added

My Data: The Bad

Did you exercise?
106 responses

- Yes
- No

71.7%

28.3%

Did you paint?
88 responses

- Yes
- No

95.5%

Did you meditate?
104 responses

- Yes
- No

99%

Did you play bass?
87 responses

- Yes
- No

89.7%

10.3%
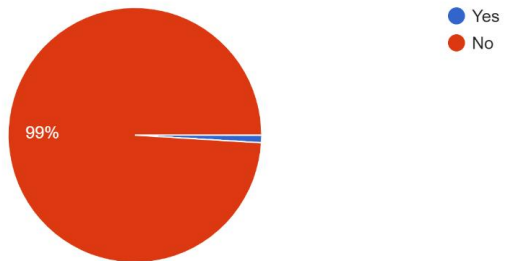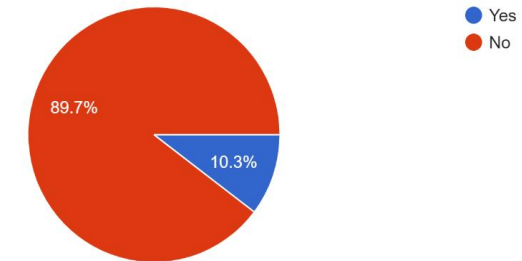
My Data: The Good

Did you eat fast food today?
106 responses
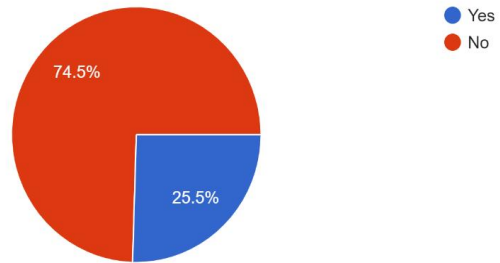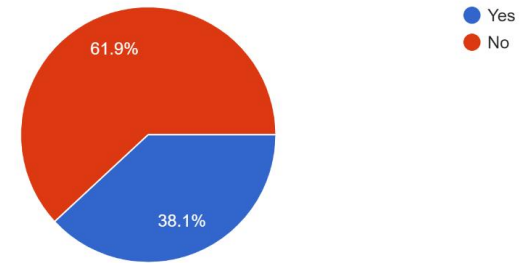
- Yes
- No

74.5%
25.5%

Did you read today?
105 responses

- Yes
- No

61.9%
38.1%

Did you check email after 8pm?
105 responses

- Yes
- No

75.2%
24.8%

Did you check email before 6am?
105 responses

- Yes
- No

39%
61%
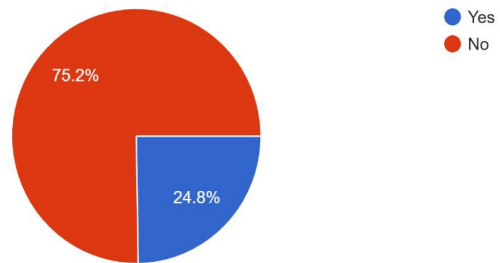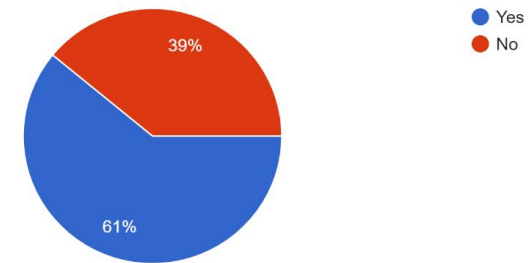
My Data

- In reading over my qualitative notes about each day, I noticed several more items:
  - Of 106 days, I mentioned nightmares on 18 occasions
  - I spoke of stress (18 times) and anxiety (19 times) more than I described days as being good (11 times) or happy (7 times)

- The narrative tends to focus overmuch on the negative:
  - 12/18: Day was "probably the busiest and most stressful" so far
  - 1/22: Day "spiraled on me quickly […] running on adrenaline all day […] just wiped out emotionally by the time I got home. It was difficult to turn it off."

- By end of project, narrative shifted a bit to focus on accomplishments
  - 3/18: I "finished classified evals and I am nearly done with the budgets. Feeling accomplished."

My Discoveries

- **Intentionally focusing on my stress and professional effectiveness helped to reframe how I viewed my days.**
  - "Am I really more stressed than I was yesterday?"
  - "What have you accomplished today that makes you feel proud of your effectiveness
  - Trendline of the data indicates that as stress increased, so did professional effectiveness

- **Attempting to implement too many changes simultaneously resulted in changing very little.**
  - If it was easy to turn off stress, it would have been an easier project to design/execute
  - I hadn't considered impact of strategies on others (paint requires setup/clean up and attracts small children, can't hear family if playing bass guitar, etc.)

- **Reading is my most effective stress relief strategy, although its direct impact on professional effectiveness is hard to discern.**
  - Based on amount read (7 nonfiction books, plus parts of 3 others—most I've read in a similar period in years), it was my most utilized strategy

Where Am I Heading Next?

- **General Reflection on the Project**:
  - Should have taken baseline measurements before attempting changes
  - Should have been intentionally focused on a few specific changes rather than pursuing a scattered approach
  - Items popped up (nightmares, for example) during course of project that I had not planned for

- **Directions for the Future**:
  - Need to focus paradigm more on the good (What did I do effectively today?) and less on the negative (What did not go well today? What might someone say to me tomorrow about something I did today?)
  - I wonder if I can combine my newly reinvigorated interest in reading nonfiction by shifting my reading habits to more professional literature that can help me be more effective during my school day

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