

# Stress, burnout, and mental health among teachers of color

EDUCATORS CALL FOR STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS



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**T**eaching in K-12 schools is stressful, as educators know and research documents. For example, Herman et al. (2020) found that 94% of middle school teachers reported high levels of stress.

Although all teachers experience stress, minoritized teachers of color often experience unique stressors. Common examples include being asked to translate for parents who do not speak English or function as the disciplinarian for students experiencing behavioral challenges (Bristol &

Mentor, 2018; Dixon et al., 2019). Often, these students are from other classes, and teachers are interrupted from working with their own students and completing their other responsibilities.

Minoritized teachers of color may accept these additional duties to support students who share their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they also engender stress. Moreover, when there are racial incidents in communities (e.g. the Black Lives Matter protests), these teachers are often expected to take the lead in

educating their peers while dealing with their personal responses to these issues.

The stressors minoritized teachers of color experience are multilayered and complex, yet there is a dearth of literature on this topic. Here is a brief overview of stressors and stress-related outcomes, particularly on mental health and burnout, and recommendations for these teachers and the school administrators who support them.

## **MENTAL HEALTH AND BURNOUT**

Stress has physical and socioemotional consequences. These

can vary from mild to extreme, depending on the severity of the stressors and access to resources such as social support, financial reserves, and health care. In severe cases, stress can be a contributing factor to mental and physical illness.

Socioemotional problems are unfairly stigmatized and viewed as a weakness or personal failing. In fact, socioemotional problems are common and cause more disability and missed workdays than any other condition (World Health Organization, 2001). Research has established that about half of us from every demographic group will suffer a period of severe emotional distress at some point during our lifetimes (Kessler et al., 2005).

Moreover, culture and economic class can influence risk factors, the types of symptoms experienced, and availability of treatments. For example, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at higher risk of experiencing stress and have less access to treatment, and men are less likely than women to seek help for socioemotional concerns (Katz et al., 1997; Reiss, 2013; Williams et al., 2010).

How does stress increase our susceptibility to emotional and physical illness? A common explanatory framework is the stress-vulnerability model (Zuckerman, 1999). Vulnerabilities refer to personal risk factors (e.g. family history of heart disease or depression) and stress refers

## ASSESS YOUR PERSONAL RESOURCES

- How do I think about my work?
- What role does my identity play in my work?
- How is my physical health?
- Do I have social support and spiritual connections in my life?
- How do I usually deal with stress?



to our emotional and physical responses to a stressor (e.g. job loss, caregiving for parents). Stressors are the potential triggers for stress and can stem from physical challenges (e.g. lack of sleep), environmental factors (e.g. living in a high-crime neighborhood), major life events (e.g. death in family), and daily hassles (e.g. racist interactions). Chronic stressors may trigger a chain of responses that, over time, can lead to physical or mental consequences.

Our feelings of stress are often directly related to how we interpret the stressor. In general, negative ways of thinking make us more vulnerable to experiencing stress and more likely to develop a physical or emotional illness, whereas more positive ways of thinking buffer our responses to stressors and are protective against the development of physical and emotional disorders.

A common consequence of chronic stress at work is burnout, which consists of emotional exhaustion (feeling overwhelmed), depersonalization (negative attitudes and feelings toward work), and a reduced sense of work accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997).

Burnout can have long-term negative impacts on individuals and organizations, and teachers who experience high levels of burnout often have other physical and mental health problems (Brunsting et al., 2014). Burnout becomes a problem when we have difficulty doing our jobs effectively or begin thinking about leaving our job (Awa et al., 2010). Burned-out teachers are seen as more distant and less sympathetic, and teachers with high levels of burnout tend to have more student problem behaviors and lower teaching effectiveness (Wong et al., 2017).

## WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

Burnout is more likely to occur when job demands outweigh our resources (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Demands can include an excessive workload, high levels of responsibility, lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, or conflict at work. While minoritized teachers of color often have additional stressors, there are steps they and school administrators can take to mitigate the negative effects of

stress and promote social and emotional well-being.

### Reduce or reframe the stressors

One strategy is to reduce exposure to stressors or reframe stressors from threats into positive challenges or career opportunities. For example, in a situation where a Black male teacher is frequently called on to be the disciplinarian for students of color (Bristol & Mentor, 2018), the teacher can discuss this with his colleagues or principal. This conversation can involve the following options:

**Define the problem.** The teacher can provide specific examples on how being seen primarily as a disciplinarian has a negative impact on his teaching effectiveness and tie these problems back to the school's goals. For instance, the teacher can document the time spent on this task and say, "In the past two weeks, I have stepped out of my own class seven times to help with disciplinary issues for other teachers. My students have lost a significant amount of instructional time. This year, our school aims to increase students' reading fluency by X%; I want to make sure that my students and I can meet this goal."

**Clarify preferences.** The teacher should decide whether he wants to take on the duty and communicate this choice clearly and respectfully. If the teacher is willing to engage in this activity, he can ask not to be interrupted during periods while teaching so that colleagues know when the teacher can be called on to assist.

If a teacher decides not to take on the additional duty, he can say, "I understand that I am the only Black male teacher in the school, and many Black male teachers take on the role of disciplinarian. I appreciate you seeking help from me, but I think my students would benefit more if I can focus on teaching them math and running the math club." This way, the teacher's colleagues and principal have a chance to reflect on their assumption (Black teachers are disciplinarians) and consider how they can help this teacher

meet his career goals.

**Formalize extra duties and gain recognition.** A teacher who decides to accept extra duties can also ask that these tasks be made an official part of his duties and considered in merit reviews. When doing so, teachers can list the specific contributions they have made (e.g. the number of disciplinary actions completed in the past month).

Similarly, a teacher who is frequently called on to translate in meetings with parents can request that the meetings be scheduled at a specifically designated time and that this duty be formalized. In this way, tasks that were an imposition and a source of stress can become recognized contributions to the school community.

### Supports and personal resources

Workplaces sometimes provide supports for employees in the form of handbooks with clear expectations or opportunities to provide feedback to the administration. When we have adequate and appropriate resources to do our jobs, we tend to have increased work engagement and satisfaction and decreased burnout. Supports like clear job expectations, autonomy, involvement in decision-making, and coworker and administrator support buffer feelings of burnout.

We cannot always change the external challenges we face, but we can change how we respond to them. We all have personal resources, and it can be helpful to list our personal resources and reflect on our ways of managing our emotions and our time.

The answers to this self-inventory (see p. 55) can help individuals manage burnout and work stress as well as identify areas for possible improvement. When we have or develop personal resources to counterbalance work-related stress, we are more likely to avoid burnout and have a more enjoyable and positive work experience.

What can be done if a teacher is already experiencing burnout? One option is an intervention called BREATHE-EASE (Ruble et al., 2019), which is an extension of work done in mental health settings (see Salyers et al., 2011). This intervention is applicable to both general and special educators and consists of a number of practices to help build personal resources (see also [www.compassforautism.org](http://www.compassforautism.org)). It begins with a focus on core contemplative practices, such as deep breathing and mindfulness exercises. The intervention also covers cognitive practices — for example, asking teachers to think about their work and reconnect with the meaning and values that brought them to teaching.

A third set of strategies focuses on physical options, such as getting appropriate sleep and nutrition. Additional aspects of the intervention include time management approaches (i.e. helping people think about how they can schedule their time and work more effectively with the time that they do have) and building social support and relationships at work, including learning how to have difficult conversations.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are more sources of support for minoritized teachers of color.

- Profound Gentlemen ([www.profoundgentlemen.org](http://www.profoundgentlemen.org)) is a nonprofit with a focus on mentoring and creating community for male minoritized teachers of color.
- The Division for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Learners ([community.cec.sped.org/ddel/home](http://community.cec.sped.org/ddel/home)) is a supportive group of minoritized teachers of color in K-12 schools.
- Cormier and Scott (2020) outline several advocacy strategies for minoritized teachers of color in special education.

## CREATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

In many cases, the stressors in a school setting stem from the culture or climate and cannot be addressed by an individual teacher. Change needs to come from principals or other administrators (see list at right). Administrators can develop and sustain a work climate that promotes the idea that attending to one's own well-being is essential. Sometimes we just need to be given permission to focus on ourselves.

All of the strategies we outline here can be considered from a cultural lens. There are several questions that principals should always be asking: Do minoritized teachers of color in my school feel valued and respected or ignored and marginalized? Am I giving their suggestions the same weight that I give to suggestions from other teachers? Are they asked to take on additional duties in my school that are not acknowledged and rewarded? Does the curriculum reflect the diversity of the country and not just the demographics of the school, especially if the diversity of the school is limited? Is the cultural climate in my school a positive one for teachers from all demographic backgrounds?

Administrators need to be able to answer in the affirmative to all of these questions and know that the minoritized teachers of color will also answer in the affirmative.

## EARLY INTERVENTION

If we can promote teacher well-being and identify early warning signs of stress and burnout in school settings, we can intervene earlier to provide extra support and avoid the long-term consequences of burnout that have a negative impact on schools, teachers, and, ultimately, the students.

However, as the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have shown, these concerns are not independent of the broader societal context. Assessments of school climate must include a cultural lens so that minoritized teachers of color have

## WHAT ADMINISTRATORS CAN DO TO REDUCE BURNOUT FOR MINORITIZED TEACHERS OF COLOR

- Have clear policies that are applied equally to all teachers.
- Ensure that all teachers feel that they and their culture are valued and respected members of the school community.
- Visit their classes and appreciate their unique styles and strengths.
- Ask how you can be an ally.
- Provide clear and realistic job expectations.
- Provide support for autonomy.
- Increase respectful communication.
- Create social situations where all cultural groups feel welcome.



support that allows them to contribute in meaningful ways without being marginalized and disenfranchised.

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