



For additional resources about building educators' resilience, see the online version of this article at bit.ly/3WMCFTD.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

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TO COMBAT STRESS, CREATE A RESILIENT SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some lessons about the social and emotional needs of people working in habitually stressful environments. To learn how teachers were coping during the early stage of the pandemic, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence surveyed educators about their most frequent daily emotions. Within three days, 5,000 respondents said they were feeling anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). This was not a new trend. In 2017, when asked the same questions, 7,000 teachers responded and said their most frequently felt daily emotions were frustrated, overwhelmed, and stressed (Brackett & Baron, 2018). The pandemic only made a stressful job more stressful.



Educators begin their careers with compassionate ideals. We are caring people who see ourselves wanting to make a difference in students' lives. But if teachers go to work each day feeling any of the emotions from the two surveys, they and our students suffer. Working under duress adversely impacts cognition, decision-making, and ability to maintain relationships, physical health, and emotional well-being, all of which are essential to be effective practitioners.

It also makes us prime candidates for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Burnout has a slow progression; it happens over time. It can manifest as fatigue, frustration, anger, negativity, or withdrawal. In contrast, compassion fatigue is spontaneous. A co-worker or a student pushes our buttons, and suddenly we're incapable of feeling empathetic. Signs include, but are not limited to, sadness and grief, nightmares, reduced empathy toward others, detachment, and avoidance of work or personal relationships.

Vicarious or secondary trauma occurs when we develop beliefs and feelings as though we experienced a negative event that happened to someone else. Listening to a student's or colleague's retelling of a traumatic event can trigger this reaction, especially if trauma is widespread in our environment. This can cause anxiety, sadness, intrusive thoughts, physical symptoms, trouble with relationships, and other difficulties. It's important to understand how these related concepts are distinct, how they impact our work, and how we can recognize their signs and symptoms.

Even more importantly, we must be intentional about creating and sustaining resilient school cultures so that everyone can cope with stress and trauma, bounce back from adversity, and move forward toward success. In many high-performing, high-poverty schools, faculty have figured this out. Understanding that they have no control over their students' home lives, economic security, or the communities where they live, educators are intentional about building a culture that fosters resilience and social and emotional competencies for themselves and their students.

The entire faculty — including administrators, teachers, cafeteria workers, and custodial

personnel — works together to create a culture based on mutual trust, a shared vision, and collegiality. Recognizing the high risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, they know and value how to care for each other. But it's not just high-poverty schools that should commit to creating such environments. In the face of a global pandemic, a drug epidemic, and school shootings, educators in all communities should be intentional about building school cultures that promote wellness.

Fostering a resilient school community begins with helping the adults put on their own oxygen masks first. These steps can help.

Create short surveys to gather information on the well-being of your staff and colleagues. Questions might include:

- On a daily basis while at work, what are your three most frequent emotions?
- What are your social and emotional needs at work?
- How well do you know the symptoms of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma?
- How well do you understand the various realms of trauma (household, environment, and community) and their impact on behavior (Quinn, 2020)?
- Are you able to recognize when you or a colleague might be struggling emotionally?
- In terms of building a culture that promotes wellness at work, what suggestions do you have for professional learning?

After gathering data, determine possible next steps to incorporate self-care into your district, school, grade-level, or department improvement plans. Watch and discuss videos of schools and districts that focus on developing strong environmental cultures and positive relationships. Note that all roles should be included because creating a supportive environment is a whole-staff approach. See a list of example videos

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Research specific strategies educators can use to support wellness at work. Draw on organizations and publications such as *The Learning Professional*, Edutopia, Mindful Schools, and Greater Good in Education. Strategies might include:

- Tap in/tap out: When teachers need to step out of their classrooms to recharge and refocus, they text a colleague to cover their class.
- Healing circles for teachers: Staff members sit in a circle to reflect and problem-solve together, support each other, and share small victories.
- Wellness check-ins: Leaders check in with staff during meetings and events to assess how they are feeling physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially, allowing leaders to make adjustments to agendas or even postpone when appropriate. Simple hand signals like thumbs up/down help with check-ins.
- Create a wellness at work column: Leaders share links to short articles, wellness tips, and videos in a regular electronic bulletin or other form of communication, sending the message that the commitment to wellness is ongoing and sustainable.
- Mindfulness for teachers: Teachers focus on the present moment and notice feelings and thoughts without judgment or interpretation. Research shows that it helps minimize negative biases (Torres, 2014). It is a practice

that faculty can do for less than five minutes during their planning times.

Encourage faculty, team, or department members to assess how well they are balancing work and life and engaging in self-care. This can be accomplished using an online self-care self-assessment. In addition, suggest staff add a wellness or self-care goal to their annual professional objectives and identify a colleague as a support person.

As you take these steps, don't forget about the power of humor. Laughter relieves physical tension, improves heart health, lowers blood pressure, and floods the body with hormones connected to well-being (Field, 2021).

You are an essential worker. Remember to put on your oxygen mask first, and that will allow you to help your colleagues and students.

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