



Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Heather Lageman

GIVE THE GIFT OF WELLNESS TO OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

This magazine's Focus on Wellness series has covered many important topics, including teacher burnout, healing-centered environments, resilient school communities, teacher wellness, and principals' well-being. As we wrap up the series, I want to focus on the connection among all of these topics, which is also the foundational connection among all of us: our shared humanity.

Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings. It comes from within us and ripples out in all of our relationships. Developing wellness starts with three processes grounded in that humanity: knowing ourselves, listening to each other, and connecting. As the executive

director of organizational development & leadership at Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland, I am deeply invested in those processes, for myself and for the educators and leaders I work with, because I see firsthand how they make a difference for people and schools.



KNOWING OURSELVES

One of the most important relationships in your life is the relationship with yourself. To fully embrace our shared humanity, you first need to know who you are. My journey to knowing myself began as I was running a race, both literally and figuratively. I love to run and I like to use that time to reflect. But I had started to dread climbing out of bed in the morning for the early runs that I used to cherish. I was tired. I didn't like the "me" that was not filled with as much hope and energy and optimism as usual. But none of the things that I usually did, including running, helped.

I decided to try investing in myself by working with a coach. One of our first activities was to explore core values. Core values are like our North Star or our internal GPS — the things that are most important to us and keep us headed in the direction of our purpose in life. Discovering my core values — joy, kindness, courage, gratitude, vulnerability — had a profound centering impact on my life. Knowing them helped me focus on taking the time to feel my life and align my choices and actions to my core values.

Working with my coach enabled me to set goals and boundaries to honor my core values, thereby aligning the resources around me so that they empower me, increasing my sense of well-being and expanding my ability to be a fully present colleague and leader.

In addition, I discovered that part of wellness and happiness at work is reflecting on how closely the individual and the organization line up on values, vision, and relationships because without alignment, the employee will not be fulfilled and the organization will not be served.

Using a leaders' dashboard helped me examine the vision, mission, and culture of my organization and how it aligns with my core values and purpose, enabling me to connect, contribute and collaborate with intentionality. After doing this work to tap into my own humanity, I began to feel more energized, more hopeful, and more like myself again.

LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

The most generous gift we can give is to listen because when we listen, we give our time and our whole being, physically and spiritually. Listening is the key to true connection. As I reflected on what makes me feel whole and well, I realized that I wasn't listening to my colleagues and friends as much as I intended to. To use the running metaphor, I had put myself on a treadmill of activities and commitments.

After attending a workshop on mindfulness and compassion based on Brach's (2019) book *Radical Compassion*, I came to see that, in trying to do so many things to support colleagues and loved ones, I was stretched too thin to listen and connect. Participating in this model with total strangers taught me that practicing mindfulness and compassion helps me be fully present to listen deeply. That kind of presence and engagement creates strong, trusting relationships, and those relationships are key to finding our shared humanity and wellness for everyone involved.

In addition, there are lots of tools to help all of us be deeper listeners and more compassionate, humane leaders. Some resources that I found helpful are Tandem Solutions' conversational framework, which is rooted in neuroscience and emphasizes listening techniques to build strong relationships (Tandem Solutions, n.d.), and empathy interviews (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020).

CONNECTING

Connecting and building rich relationships that align with your core values is also key to establishing a form of wellness that is grounded in shared humanity. As many wise leaders have

pointed out in recent years, our society needs a revival of relationships. In a time of disconnection, polarization, and isolation, we need to make an active decision to be in relationships with one another, unlike in previous eras when interdependent relationships were the norm in all parts of life.

Schools are inherently social places, but that doesn't mean we are intentionally developing relationships. Doing so is an important part of rebuilding and staying connected to our shared humanity.

There are many approaches to rebuilding those relationships in schools. One I recommend is asset mining. Taking the time to name who my people are and who I want to dream with and learn with provided me with a road map for intentional connection. It helped me identify to whom I can reach out to give and get support and inspiration.

I also recommend an activity sociologist and speaker Brené Brown developed called Square Squad (Brown, 2018). It helped me think about who matters in my life and if my relationships were serving me. I discovered much of my time was devoted to acquaintanceships rather than relationships, largely because many of the commitments filling up my calendar were out of a sense of obligation. Recognizing this allowed me to reprioritize my time and energy.

INVEST IN YOURSELF

For me, the journey of self-discovery is a journey of personal and professional wellness. It has helped me come into my own as a learner and a leader. I encourage all educators to make these investments in themselves and

experience the benefits.

The benefits for me have included having more patience with myself and others, feeling more comfortable advocating for myself and others, setting clear boundaries, and apologizing less. My relationships are richer, and there is more peace and joy in my life.

It can feel daunting to embark on this kind of journey, so I recommend starting with some simple reflection questions:

- What brings you joy?
- What brings you peace?
- What makes you feel connected?
- What makes you feel whole?

During this time of year, when many people and cultures are celebrating holiday traditions, let's give the gift of wellness to ourselves and each other by standing up for our humanity and each other's humanity. Now and throughout the year, may we all have the space and grace to know ourselves, listen, and connect with others. We have the potential to change ourselves and everyone we encounter for the better.

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