TEACHERS: PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

According to several studies and reports, teaching is one of the most stressful jobs in the country. The American Federation of Teachers' 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey found that 61 percent of teachers said their jobs were always or often stressful—more than double the rate of non-teaching working adults—and 58 percent said they had poor mental health due to stress levels.[1] That was before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and since then, the transition to online learning, debates over reopening, and individual safety concerns are making teachers' mental health worse.[2]

If you're feeling tired and disengaged, there's a good chance it's related to trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and/or "battle fatigue." Teachers are often focused on taking care of and supporting others, but without prioritizing your wellbeing, those stress levels won't lift. Your mental health isn't only important to you—teacher wellness is also linked to stability in schools and student achievement.[3]

WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF

SET BOUNDARIES EARLY ON—AND HOLD THEM. Expressing your needs is necessary. Whether your school has gone virtual or not, you may be in more constant contact with parents that you're used to. You can't be on-the-clock at all times, so set office hours for remote teaching—even for young kids. A 2-hour block a few times a week lets students (and parents) know when they can reach you immediately and allows you to protect your free time. Schedule time to respond to other requests or let students' families know that you're unavailable after 5pm and will return any emails or calls the following day. If your school goes virtual, give yourself a dedicated workspace at home to signal to both yourself and others that you're in work mode.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL. COVID-19 has taken a lot of certainty away from everyone—controlling what you're able to will help give you back structure and a sense of security that you've likely been craving. You're in charge of how you spend your free time, your priorities, and your mindset. Check in with yourself: Are your news sources trustworthy? Do you need a break from media exposure? What can you do to boost your own sense of safety? Get involved in policy decisions in your district, attend school board meetings, and participate in your union to voice your opinions on school plans.

MOVE YOUR BODY. Teachers are often on their feet all day and spend a lot of time moving around the classroom. It may not seem like much, but you're actually releasing a lot of energy through that constant movement. If your school has gone virtual, you may be sitting a lot more. Set a timer to remind yourself to get up, even if it's just for a 30-second stretch or walk around your house or apartment. If you want more consistent movement, think about using a yoga ball for a chair, get a standing desk, or buy a mini exercise bike for under your desk.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY. Social connection is crucial during times of hardship, so lean on your support network. You aren't the only one trying to adjust. Feeling isolated or unsupported can make things worse. Reach out to that colleague who seems to "get" you, the person who always makes you laugh, or someone else who you can count on to validate your feelings. A short conversation can go a long way in helping you feel less alone.

KEEP UP WITH THE SELF-CARE. One of the best ways to ensure mental wellness is by having a strong foundation. Make sure you get at least 7 hours of sleep, eat a nutritious diet, spend time outside, and exercise regularly. Don't forget to work in some other self-care activities like journaling or meditation—write it into your schedule so you don't make excuses! Self-care can be hard to do in between creating lesson plans, teaching, communicating with parents and taking care of other responsibilities like cooking and cleaning, but it's important.

MAINTAIN REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS. Life isn't "business as usual" right now, no matter how much you may want it to be. Work on shifting your expectations—don't frame current experiences as "terrible," look at them as "different." Give yourself time and space to adjust to your new normal instead of pressuring yourself to act how you did before COVID-19. Be patient with others—some of your students have probably been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and have their minds on things other than school. And set small, realistic goals for yourself, especially with distance learning. Remember that you don't have control over your students' environment, background noise, workspace, or parental support. But you can still help make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed, by giving students access to you and the necessary materials.

WAYS TO HELP OTHER TEACHERS

CHECK IN ON EACH OTHER. Just a genuine "how are you doing?" can really help a fellow teacher feel supported and more connected to the people around them. Vulnerability can be hard, so you may need to open up first to show you're sincere. If someone tells you they're struggling, let them know they have your support and if you can't talk then, that you'll reach out soon. When you follow up, make sure to listen to what they need; some people may need help finding resources, while others may want some time to vent with someone who gets it.

HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE FOR SELF-CARE. Share what you're doing to maintain your own mental health and any upcoming self-care goals you have, like reading a book to unwind or what you're up to next weekend. Ask what others are doing. Making time to take care of yourself can be hard; knowing your coworkers are aware of your plans can provide that extra bit of motivation to follow through with them, especially when you're exhausted. Don't forget to ask your coworkers how their self-care activity went the next time you see them!

EXPRESS GRATITUDE. Practicing gratitude is a great way to give yourself a more positive outlook. Try to name three things you're thankful for each day. Thank your coworkers when they do something to help you out or make your day a bit easier and let your students and their parents know you appreciate their hard work and flexibility. It's a win-win: it will boost your mood, make others feel appreciated and noticed, and help you all feel more connected to your community.

TAKE TIME TO LAUGH. Humor can be an effective coping tool during scary and tense times. Don't be afraid to lighten the mood by sending memes or sharing a funny story—just be mindful of your timing and audience.

PAY ATTENTION TO NONVERBAL CUES. A lot of people have trouble opening up about how they're feeling, and others may not even realize that they're struggling if their mind is constantly focused on work. If you're at school in-person, you can probably pick up on which of your colleagues or students are having a harder time than others. Typical body language varies, but if you notice a change like less eye contact or moving or talking slower, it's worth bringing up. If your school is virtual, think about who you haven't heard from lately that you may have expected to. Reach out to those individuals—there's no need for anyone to suffer alone. If you aren't comfortable doing so, men tion what you've noticed to a colleague that they are closer with or a supervisor.

LEND EACH OTHER SUPPORT. There is a lot of power in shared experiences. People need social connection, and mutual feelings of vulnerability and stress often create some of the strongest social bonds.[4] Start up a weekly support call with a group of friends, grade-level teachers across your district, or all teachers at your school. Planning for this makes it a priority and gives you all a safe space to vent, listen, and problem-solve together. You can also help each other with work logistics—if you love teaching a certain subject or unit, offer to share your lesson plan with other grade level teachers and they can share theirs with you to split up the burden.

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and feel as though your stress is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take a screen at **MHAScreening.org** to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES

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