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Foreword by Diane Sweeney

Grades 6-12

TEACHING, LEARNING, + TRAUMA

Responsive Practices
for Holding Steady in
Turbulent Times

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Self-Care

Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself

CHAPTER

3

*Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day
is the rest we take between two breaths.*

—Etty Hillesum

On a Monday morning in late November, Ms. Patel pulls into the full school parking lot. Cold and windblown, she struggles to hold onto her coffee mug, lunch bag, purse, and tote bag—overflowing with student work. Hurriedly, she rushes into the school building with less than five minutes to spare before the first-period bell rings. Reeling from the chaos of a Thanksgiving weekend with family, she is regretting the decision to arrive back home late last night, instead of giving herself some time back at her apartment. The planning and grading session on the two-hour flight didn't exactly accomplish all that she had hoped, so she won't be handing back the papers she had promised to the kids today.

She feels irritable, exhausted, and rushed as she blows past some students and enters her classroom. Lights . . . on. Computer . . . on. The students stroll in with their sleepy eyes and morning groans. Ms. Patel knows she must press on with the new history project, as finals are just around the corner, even though she has yet to return the last two weeks of graded work. The bell rings as she wearily asks students to take their seats. With a giant swig of coffee, she wonders how many days until winter break . . . as another day begins.

Self-Care: Why Is It Important?

Teaching is a vocation that involves long hours, low pay, classrooms stuffed with kids, grading, lunch duty, coaching, tutoring, planning, chaperoning dances, attending sports events, and state-mandated testing. What kind of people are inspired to take a job like this? People like you—kind, passionate, intellectual, caring, loving, selfless, idealists who *want to make a difference in this world*. For many, teaching is a calling. Some are drawn to this work in an effort to give back what they themselves received. Others are in it to ensure that students get what they themselves did not. Many were inspired by great teachers who changed the course of their lives. The single greatest impact

on student learning and formation is the one made by high-quality, passionate teachers (Hattie, 2012). This noble work comes at a cost, which can include burnout and poor physical, financial, and emotional health. If you don't attend to and care for yourself, you won't last in this profession.

Student Experience

Teacher stress impacts students' stress. Because students with chronic stress and trauma need their teachers to be clear, present, and loving, they are easily derailed if the teacher is unable to effectively attend to their needs or the needs of the class. In Chapter 2, we highlighted the importance of the teacher being a regulator of the class. If the teacher is dysregulated by symptoms of burnout or vicarious trauma, the students and learning will suffer. In 2016, University of British Columbia researchers tracked the levels of stress hormones of more than 400 elementary students in different classes. They found that teachers who reported higher levels of burnout had students with higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol each morning, suggesting that classroom tensions are “contagious” (Sparks, 2017). Teachers need to make their own health a priority, so that they can co-regulate and be effective in their life's work.

Adult Experience

Overcrowded classrooms, underfunded schools, long hours, and students who experience increased mental health issues related to chronic stress and trauma often leave teachers feeling more like first responders than educators. As an educator–first responder, you are tasked with having to make split-second decisions on the front lines, often alone. This work takes a heavy toll. And because you are a selfless, loving, caring individual who was drawn to this work to make an impact on students' lives, it is most likely that you put *yourself* at the bottom of the list of things to take care of. You may find yourself thinking things like *I don't know how much longer I can do this*, or *Why is this so hard for me, when it seems like others have it easy? When is the next school break?* You are not alone. Teachers often find themselves overwhelmed and stressed out, which can lead to physical, psychological, and spiritual illness.

The first step in preventing burnout is to increase your awareness of its symptoms, causes, and impact. The next step is to identify what strategies are most helpful for you to attend to your needs. Figure 3.1 provides some reflection questions for your consideration in an effort to (re)ignite your passion for the work. There is no bigger heart than the heart of an educator.

Figure 3.1 What Your Heart Knows . . .

<p>Why did you choose to be an educator?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>What qualities do you possess that make you a good educator?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>What do you love most about this work?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Foundation for Effective Practice #1: Avoiding Burnout

Teacher burnout rates are higher than ever. More than 41% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014); in total, approximately half a million, or 15% of teachers, leave the profession every year (Haynes, 2014). These statistics don't acknowledge the vast number of teachers who stay in the field while wrestling with symptoms of burnout. What many fail to realize is that burnout is actually work-induced depression. According to research published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, there is a significant overlap between burnout and depression. More specifically, educators experiencing burnout simultaneously exhibit depressive symptoms, including, but not limited to, loss of interest or pleasure in activities, mood swings, and fatigue (Diaz, 2018).

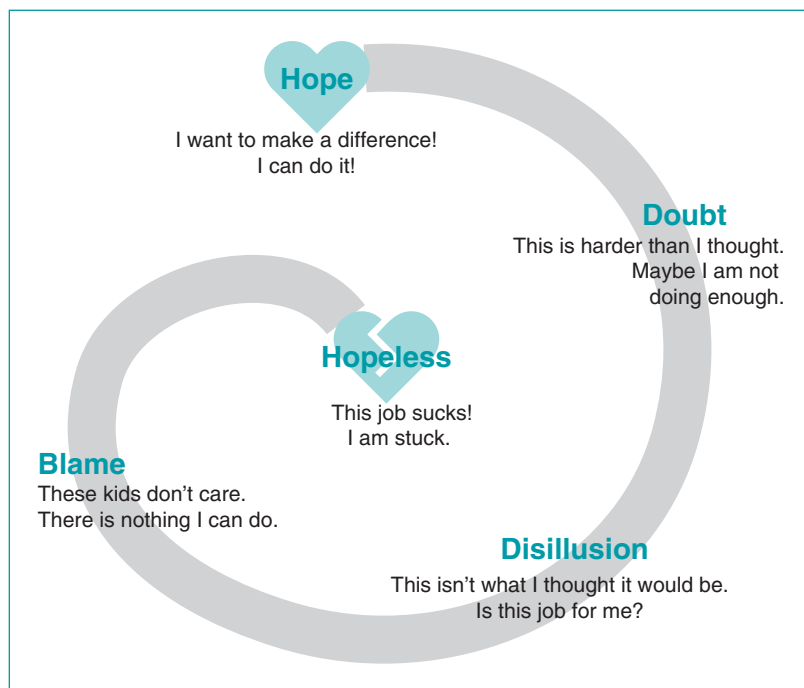
Burnout happens slowly and over time. It commonly occurs among people whose identity is strongly connected with their work, at those times when the work has become discouraging, hopeless, disappointing, or less meaningful. It isn't that teachers can't handle the job, so much as they feel they aren't getting the support they need to handle the stressors associated with teaching. We all know that teachers are underpaid, are under-resourced, and are under high expectations to produce results. But in today's schools, the impact of chronic stress on both teacher and student make it extra challenging for teachers to stay healthy, balanced, prepared, and passionate.

The good news about burnout is that, if you recognize the symptoms early enough, you may only need to make minor adjustments. Perhaps spending a few days away, updating your self-care plan, bolstering your support systems, reading a good book, or having dinner with a friend will help turn things around. Staying mindful of your burnout warning signs (see Figure 3.3) will help you recognize the symptoms earlier and enable you to attend to your needs.

No teacher ever wants someone to think that they don't care about kids or aren't willing to put in the hard work to make a difference in a student's life. Therefore teachers often sacrifice themselves, internalize things they have no control over, try harder, do more, feel discouraged, and blame others, and it's easy to spiral into apathy, anger, or despair. Without self-care practices, this cycle usually ends up in burnout at best or breakdown at worst. Figure 3.2 represents this cycle of burnout that you may recognize having experienced at some point in your career. Notice if this feels familiar or you see yourself anywhere on this diagram.

This cycle comes with associated symptoms that manifest when your needs are not met and adjustments are not made. Figure 3.3 lists some of the symptoms of burnout. Do you recognize any of them?

Figure 3.2 The Cycle of Burnout



Source: Figure layout by Bill Grimmer.

Figure 3.3 Simple Symptoms of the Sizzle

Lack of patience	Being late for work
Irritability	Looking for other jobs
Poor planning	Apathy
Lack of motivation	Blaming others
Missing work	Complaining
Not attending to daily tasks	Checking out

What are some of your warning signs that you are starting to sizzle?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Foundation for Effective Practice #2: Recognizing Vicarious Trauma

There is a condition that is more significant than burnout, commonly known in other helping professions—such as ER physicians, police, firefighters, therapists, and other first responders—as *vicarious trauma*. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2011) defines “vicarious trauma” as a state of tension and preoccupation with the stories/trauma experiences described by clients (students). And although you are a teacher or a coach and not a therapist or a police officer, you are still at risk of being impacted by the stories of the students with whom you work. Vicarious trauma happens when you can no longer tolerate hearing about or witnessing someone’s trauma. It is often accompanied by a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Ms. Fisher goes to the counselor’s office in tears, holding a piece of paper crumpled in her hand. It’s a short story that a student had written that was both touching and disturbing. She sits there, first apologizing for her tears and then saying: “I can’t stop thinking about this student. Our kids have such hard lives—I can’t imagine the struggles they go through. How do they show up at school each day

(Continued)

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while this kind of thing is going on at home?” As she waves the paper toward the counselor’s face, she bends her head and sobs into her hands. The counselor listens as she continues: “What is the point? I mean, how are things ever going to get better in the world? I don’t know why I am even teaching; I am so tired. What is the point? Nothing we do matters.”

Now, those of us who work with kids know that some of them share stories of hardship and heartache. And it isn’t the fact that Ms. Fisher was upset by the story that is concerning. It is her deep hopelessness, her ruminating about the student, her exhaustion, and the intensity of her emotion that illustrate her vicarious trauma. After years of reading student work and absorbing the feelings that came up for her, without attending to her own self-care needs, Ms. Fisher is now herself experiencing symptoms of trauma that she did not experience firsthand (vicarious).

Listed in Figure 3.4 are some of the ways that the ACA defines the signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma.

Figure 3.4 Symptoms of Vicarious Trauma

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tardiness • Free-floating anger/irritability • Worried about not doing enough • Absenteeism • Irresponsibility • Overwork • Irritability • Exhaustion • Talking to oneself (a critical symptom) • Lack of collaboration • Withdrawal and isolation from colleagues • Negative perception • Questioning one’s own beliefs/worldview/spirituality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding being alone • Hopelessness • Dropping out of community affairs • Rejecting physical/emotional closeness • Staff conflict • Detachment • Blaming others • Conflict • Poor relationships • Poor communication • Impatience • Avoiding work that has to do with trauma • Difficulty in having rewarding relationships |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Source: Fact Sheet #9: Vicarious Trauma, (2011). American Counseling Association. www.counseling.org

If you recognize yourself in this symptom list and suspect you may be experiencing vicarious trauma, please consider meeting with a mental health professional to get some support for yourself. This phenomenon is more common than you think, and there is nothing *deficient in you* because you are struggling in this work. In fact, it is because you are so caring that you are vulnerable to vicarious trauma. You owe it to yourself and your students to get support if you need it.

Foundation for Effective Practice #3: Navigating Mixed Messages and Cultural Norms

Why is it that society’s narrative about helping professionals like first responders and teachers is that they are willing to accept “payment” not in dollars but in the intrinsic “rewards” associated with doing good work and making a difference? Being underpaid isn’t just a narrative; it’s a cultural norm. Take salaries, for example; teachers are paid 21.4% less than similarly educated and experienced professionals, according to a recent Economic Policy Institute (EPI) report, which found that the “teacher pay gap” recently reached a record high (EPI, 2018). No wonder it is hard for teachers to maintain good financial health with today’s cost of living. Take a minute to reflect on the different kinds of investments and sacrifices you have made for this career. They are important and worth protecting. This is another reason why self-care matters.

Figure 3.5 provides some questions for your reflection on your path to being an educator.

Figure 3.5 Reflections on the Journey to Becoming an Educator

Describe your path to this career.

How much time and money have you invested in your education?

What sacrifices, both personal and professional, have you made for your career?

Being underpaid is just one aspect of the cultural norm that sends the message that in order to be a “good teacher” (read: good person), you must make sacrifices—you have to work long hours, have poor financial health, say “yes” to everything, do more, and be selfless. Are these messages explicit? No, but the culture and perception of education send these types of messages nonetheless. This view supports a sort of martyr mindset that makes it difficult for teachers to identify and ask for what they need. Figure 3.6 shows what can happen when the very character traits that drew you to this profession warp into poor professional and personal health.

Figure 3.6 Too Much of a Good Thing: When Good Intentions Go Wrong

Best Intentions	Worst Outcomes
Desire to help	Enabling others
Doing more because needs are great	Disillusionment and resentment
Wanting to connect with students	Having your emotional needs met by students instead of healthy adults
Wanting to be a part of something bigger	Becoming enmeshed and losing your individual identity
Caring for others	Neglecting your own needs
Wanting to make a difference	Pushing your agenda on others

What Works in the Classroom: Translating Self-Care Into Teaching and Learning Practices

If you are feeling hopeless, don't despair. It is possible to create work-life balance and maintain vitality, good health, and joy in this profession. Taking care of yourself on a personal level is the predicate for taking care of yourself on a professional level. In teaching, this principle nudges us to examine several core areas of practice in order to develop a sustainable and generative career. The following section is filled with strategies to help you mitigate chronic stress, reduce burnout and vicarious trauma, and increase self-care. The foundational principles are as follows:

- ▶ Less is more—the art of sifting, sorting, and letting go
- ▶ Patterns—the art of recognizing ruts, drains, and seasons that impact your work
- ▶ Sustainability—the art of creating personal and professional planning habits

Less Is More

Time. Because you're a salaried employee, your day does not begin and end when the bell rings. You have hours of grading, planning, supply-gathering, parent conferences, worry, stress, and strain that last long after the final bell of the day. In many school cultures, whether implicitly or explicitly stated, there are expectations for teachers to attend dances, games, staff parties, fundraisers, field trips, plays, and so much more. One of the strongest tensions that exists in the realm of self-care is *wanting to participate* in or support students with extracurricular programming and *needing time away from school*. Figure 3.7 is meant to help you identify how your time is spent, so that you may make conscious choices about how to spend your time in future.

Figure 3.7 Where Does All the Time Go?

Take an assessment of how much time you are spending at your job:

In an average week, how many hours do you spend teaching/working? _____

In an average week, how many hours do you spend outside of school on planning? _____ On grading? _____

In an average week, how many hours do you spend supervising or participating in extracurricular school-related activities? _____

Write those numbers below, and add them up:

___ hours spent teaching/working

___ hours spent planning

___ hours spent grading

___ hours of extracurricular school-related activities

56 hours of sleep (8 hours a night), if you are *lucky*

___ **Total number of hours, including sleep**

Take the total and subtract it from 168 hours (the number of hours in a week) $168 - \underline{\quad} = \underline{\quad}$

That is the number of hours you have left in an average week for family, friends, laundry, shopping, cooking, cleaning, resting, and Netflix.

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Given that time is one of the greatest commodities we have, it is helpful to consider ways to protect it. Here are some strategies you might consider:

- Use a color-coded calendar to document actual time spent for a month. Notice patterns, and create changes as needed.
- List ways you can manage your time more effectively.
- Identify what is most important in your job and what is secondary. Let the most important thing *be* the most important thing.
- Say “no” to things that pull you out of balance. Set limits.

Designing curriculum by focusing on what matters most. Even the most effective teachers can’t teach everything. There are not enough days in the school year and minutes during the week to cover all that is *required* in most curriculum maps, scope and sequences, and unit plans. Something has to go. Operating under the premise that preserving and sustaining resources, namely time and effort, forces educators to name what matters most. For years, we have encouraged teachers to be brave and to remove the clutter in order to name what is most meaningful. Education gurus like Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design* (2008) pushed educators to identify *essential understandings* and clearly *defined performance tasks* more than a decade ago. Expeditionary Learning Education, for example, offers an entire school design founded on the “less is more” principle, one that crafts learning endeavors that focus both

students and teachers on fewer topics and skills while aiming for excellence in student character and high-quality student work. These curricular and systemic efforts live out the belief that some things are more important than others to learn; therefore, they must be prioritized. This pursuit requires bravery on behalf of teachers and leaders if learning is to be about uncovering and discovering, not just covering content (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008).

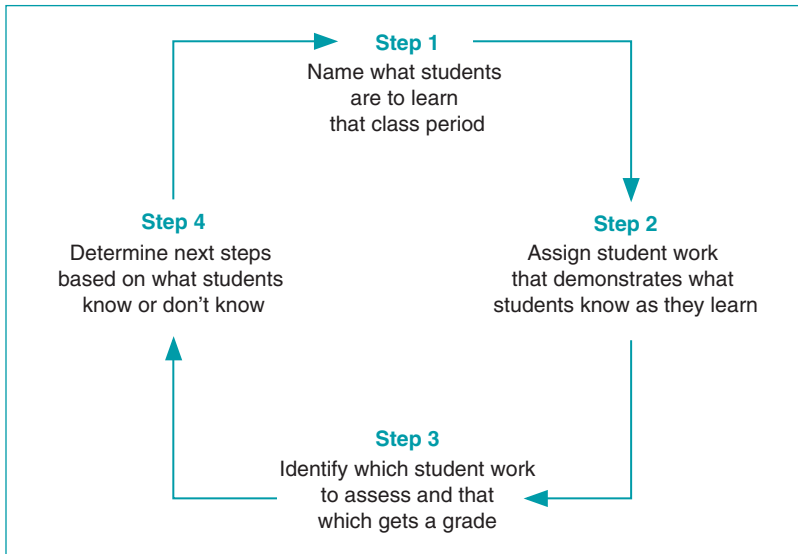
Upon reflection, caring for ourselves and for our students demands that we, as educators, curate teaching and learning experiences. This can be an uncomfortable experience, especially if the expectation is that we cover everything. Teachers have to be brave in advocating for doing fewer things better in order to sustain effective practice. Taking action requires asking the following questions: “With whom do I consult—a curriculum director, department head, fellow teacher, or mentor—in order to help me determine what matters most?” “If there is not a resource in my building, where might I turn for guidance?” You are never alone, so seek out support; you’ll find someone. Additionally, with accessibility to online teacher groups, professional organizations, and blogs, it’s feasible to reach out to the larger teaching community for ideas and support. Figure 3.8 provides elements to consider in practicing *less is more* in curriculum design in order to focus on what matters most within limited instructional time.

Figure 3.8 Elements of “Less Is More” in Curriculum Design

Less	More
Time learning many topics	Time investigating fewer topics
Time covering topics	Time dedicated to uncovering and discovering topics
Emphasis on surface-level facts	Emphasis on deeper meaning
Recitation	Creation
Quizzes, tests	Formative assessment, summative performance tasks
Units of study	Exploration of topics

Workflow that flows. Time is both a teacher’s greatest asset and a teacher’s biggest nemesis. Scarcity of time forces you to identify what matters most in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. When you’re considering what matters most in regard to using this precious commodity, Figure 3.9 outlines a process to help you make decisions while implementing the “less is more” principle. Ask yourself, *What matters most as I step through the planning process?*

Teachers can’t possibly give a grade to every piece of classwork or homework. Sustainable practices dictate that some assignments will matter more than others as a measure of what students know. Most student work products provide insight into students’ progress toward desired learning intentions, although not each one will be given a grade. In fact, most won’t. The point of student work is to provide proof of student learning (or not learning) along the way, whereby students are aware of their progress throughout

Figure 3.9 Teacher Workflow: What Matters Most?

Source: Figure layout by Bill Grimmer.

a class period (Williams, 2018). Some assignments will demonstrate incremental learning during or between class periods, in the spirit of formative assessment; others will show a broader understanding of knowledge and skills, summative style. The teacher must decide what is most valuable in providing evidence of student learning. These work products (assessments) are prime candidates for grades that make it into the grade book.

Finally, take a moment to recognize that you are an educated, intelligent, caring, insightful, and resourceful professional who can and will make decisions about curriculum, assessment, and instruction effectively and meaningfully, no matter the noise out there. In the absence of leadership helping to define effective workflow practices, there are guideposts to consult, and you can find the way. Teaching is a people profession. Use your heart, intuition, and know-how to make the best decisions possible.

A True Story From Brooke

This is a funny but tragic story about grading. In my second year of teaching, I assigned a reading response journal that students completed three times a week for a quarter semester. This was a newly popular assessment tool in secondary education that sounded very promising in getting to know students' literary preferences and reading comprehension. I had students from four of my five classes—roughly 120 students—submit their journals at the end of the nine-week grading period. Period after period, students placed their work into stacks that grew into a mountain—as did the anxiety I felt from merely looking at the journals.

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How was I possibly going to grade all of them? What feedback would I provide? What was the purpose of this assignment again? That afternoon, I loaded the trunk of my car with three plastic crates that carved red creases in my palms. I shut the lid and drove away into the winter night. Eventually, summer break came and I needed to sell my car. It wasn't until a prospective buyer wanted to look into the trunk did I realize what was in there—120 student reading journals. I stood staring, aghast at the denial or avoidance that brought me to this moment four months later. I felt shame, and was so embarrassed I could have died. Yes, I had forgotten all about the piles of composition books. And the kicker was that not a single student had asked about them—ever. Not a single one. To this day, I feel as though I should write each student an apology for wasting his or her time. The sad thing is they probably wouldn't recall the assignment, much less the lack of feedback. I learned an unforgettable lesson that day about the importance of meaningful work, informal assessment, and workflow. I promised myself that I would never place myself, or the students, in that bind again. If I wasn't clear about why I would be asking students to do work, and if I wouldn't be attending to it in a timely way, then it would be better not to assign it in the first place.

Patterns

People who work in or attend school have a concept of time that is different from those who don't. School people see time in the context of:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class periods • Contact time • Planning periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-quarters • Trimesters • Semesters • Block days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bell schedules • Hiring cycles • Budget cycles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacations • Government holidays • Fall = work • Summer = break
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This unique orientation to time informs a way of being in the world for both educators and students. Additionally, there is an overlay of seasonal and time changes, school calendaring, and various transitions that are all at play throughout the school year. It is helpful to look at the influence of these patterns as they relate to your self-care practices, because there are certain times of the year that will require more attention and structure than others. Remember Ms. Patel from the beginning of the chapter? Think about how transitioning back to school following a holiday vacation is different from transitioning into a new school year. What do you notice about yourself when winter approaches and daylight has disappeared by the time you leave the building for the day?

It is important to note that adolescents who live with chronic stress and trauma are impacted by these patterns as well. Transitions

and lack of structure are difficult for students who are dysregulated to begin with. Like bustling winds that often accompany the fall season, students and teachers alike can feel unsettled and out of sorts at this time of year. Long winter days can trigger depressive episodes, and holiday breaks in unstable homes are not joyful or festive. Winter holidays may cause a resurfacing of grief and loss. What follows is a reminder of what is missing when a student's experience is not congruent with what our culture says holidays with family should be. The rigidity of the school schedule can be hard to adjust to after unstructured time during breaks.

There is often an increase of illness during the winter months, which leads to absences, which leads to increased stress when a student falls behind. As the long winter rolls into spring, there is an increase in anxiety as energy returns to the system. Time speeds up as students and teachers head into spring, knowing how much there is to do before the end of the year, especially for graduating seniors.

When it comes to the classroom, energy and stamina are also impacted by the patterns of the school year. This ebb and flow should inform when the best time of year is to engage in learning and assessment activities such as a highly involved, long-term project. Is there a stretch of time in the school calendar that will help cultivate momentum? Do students have the capacity to stay with it? Do you, as the teacher, have the capacity to facilitate and assess it? If there is limited time, then it may be best to either modify the assignment or identify a better time in the school year in order to reduce the panic created by running out of teaching days. Frequently, meaningful learning opportunities take longer than planned, so it's wise to build in more time than seems needed.

Sustainability

The practice of creating habits and rituals is important to creating behavior change. Creating new habits can be challenging. Your brain wants to create habits to save itself energy (Duhigg, 2012). It's going to do it anyway, so you might as well be an active creator in the habits you choose. Having some system of accountability, and surrounding yourself with people who support you, will help ensure you are successful in making the changes necessary for you to be vibrant and healthy. Shifting the focus from caring for others to caring for yourself is not easy or natural for teachers, so design a system that works for you. Figure 3.10 is an example of a self-care plan that is meant to be a springboard. Feel free to use this as a template or to design your own plan that will help you identify goals and stay on track. Be as creative or detailed as you would like.

Figure 3.10 Self-Care Plan

Include personally meaningful activities that support *you* to continue in your pursuit of self-regulation and balance. Good health involves adding something new and letting go of something that no longer serves you, in order to achieve balance. Think about how you might incorporate these activities both on the job and outside of work.

More of this . . .	Less of that . . .
Things That Bring Me Joy	Things That Drain My Energy
Relationships That Fulfill Me	Relationships That Exhaust Me
Ways to Move My Body	Ways I Stay Stuck
Rituals That Feed My Soul	Beliefs That Limit Me
Rituals to Help Me Transition Out of Work	
Affirmations: Messages of Positive Intentions and Values to State to Myself Every Day	
Heart Connection: What Are the Reasons I Became an Educator?	
Recovery: One Thing I Can Do to Restore Myself After a Really Hard Day	

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Getting started can be the hardest part. Remember that sometimes you may need to build in more of something, while other times you may need to let go of something to create the right balance. Self-care plans are meant to be working, fluid, and interactive documents. Don't get stuck. Give yourself permission to modify, and adjust as frequently as needed. Figure 3.11 has some suggestions that might help spark ideas if getting started feels tough.

Figure 3.11 Forms of Self-Care

Leave work at work	Connect with non-school friends	Plan a vacation	Limit screen time
Mindfulness practices	Find a therapist	Connect with nature	Create quiet time for yourself
Say “no” more	Deep breathing	Make time for meaningful activities/hobbies	Exercise
Eat healthy	Ask for help	Journal (art, gratitude, writing, dreams)	Use a planner to protect self-care time/activities
Create art	Meditate	Say “yes” more	Create a vision board
Spiritual practices	Read non-work books	Take a class	Protect family time

Accountability Partners

Change is hard. In order to be successful, it is helpful to have an accountability partner or group. Accountability partners serve as gentle reminders to help you stay on track. The role of this person or group is to check in with you about your own process, as well as to encourage you. A good accountability partner is part drill sergeant and part cheerleader. Who in your life might be a good accountability partner? Is there a small group of people at your work or a coach who could fill that role?

Planning Habits for the Classroom

Winging it doesn't work, particularly if the aim is to mitigate stress and the effects of trauma. It does, however, create chaos and induce tension where there needn't be more. School days are characterized by plenty of unpredictability, which can be energizing in some instances, yet overall an ad hoc approach to planning only increases the likelihood of stress that further contributes to burnout.

The bell rings, and Mr. Johnson is desperately searching through his work bag for the day's lesson, while students impatiently watch his every move. Regretfully, he doesn't feel prepared. Finally, he locates it! He gives a small sigh of relief, although it's not the kind of plan he knows works best for his energetic and lively class. Today's topic is mitosis. He didn't make time to identify a student-centered activity in order to explore the topic, so he figures that he will just provide the students necessary information in a lecture format. What he doesn't cover in his lecture, he will have them read from their textbooks in class, then answer questions for homework. He really

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doesn't like to lecture, but he has no other choice. Frazzled and hesitant, he begins, "Take out your notebooks, a pen, your textbook, and turn to page 12." Students sigh. And so it goes for 35 minutes . . . wah, wah, wah . . . and time drags on until the bell rings. Mr. Johnson is thankful that class is over. He is hoarse from talking at students, the students are numb from listening, and no one feels engaged or energized. The students drag themselves out the door and into the hall, where there is a noticeable increase in energy and conversation. Deflated and drained, Mr. Johnson sighs, wondering how he will muster up the energy to do this all again next period.

As an instructional coach, or fellow observer, surely you understand that it doesn't have to be this way. No one—neither Mr. Johnson nor his students—wants to repeat this lifeless pattern every day. In order to prevent this deadening effect, effective (and life-giving) planning habits are imperative, particularly those that place students at the center of the learning, where energy, interest, and engagement have a greater likelihood of increasing.

The Planning Habits Checklist (Figure 3.12) outlines an example of essential planning habits—in and outside of the classroom—that promote self-care in teachers and students. Take a moment to check in with yourself about what habits you have or would like to have in order to provide more care for yourself and your students.

Figure 3.12 Planning Habits Checklist

Elements of Effective Lesson Design (Behind the Scenes)	Elements of an Effective Teaching Mindset (Behind the Scenes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Anchored in content standards <input type="checkbox"/> Student learning targets clearly defined (use of student-friendly language) <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly defined rationale for learning (In other words, why are students learning this?) <input type="checkbox"/> Warm-up/Do-Nows <input type="checkbox"/> Direct instruction, as needed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-centered learning activities accompanied by student work (differentiated by content, work product, and process, as possible) <input type="checkbox"/> Consideration for reteaching (anticipating confusion) and/or stretching learning <input type="checkbox"/> Formative assessment of student work throughout class period <input type="checkbox"/> Exit Slip/Mastery Check <input type="checkbox"/> Plan for homework (practice from day's lesson) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> How am I doing? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I well-planned? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I calm? If not, what do I need to do to take care of myself? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I feeling dread or anxiety? With what class? With whom? Why? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I alert to those students who trigger me? <input type="checkbox"/> Do I have a plan to relate with those students? A reset? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I open to new possibilities? <input type="checkbox"/> Am I loving?

Taking Self-Care School-Wide

School leaders can help teachers identify strategies for determining what is most important in sustainable practice, then design systems to support them to get the work done effectively. Helping colleagues on the front line by supporting them in doing fewer things better—such as teaching fewer preps, taking a hiatus from coaching and from sponsoring clubs, and limiting supervisory duties—will help retain good teachers. This is not to mention guiding teachers in efficient workflow practices related to effective lesson planning and grading. Leadership entails preventing people from getting buried under the load. Never underestimate how much better it can make teachers feel about their work if they have permission to take on less in order to be more effective.

In thinking about school-wide professional growth in this area, it's understandable to wonder where, in an already packed calendar, school leadership can make the time to accommodate another topic for a faculty in-service, collaborative peer group, or whole-group learning experience. Figure 3.13 presents the case as to why self-care is an important practice to develop and sustain.

Figure 3.13 Why Administrators Should Care About Self-Care

Costs of Not Caring About It	Benefits of Caring About It
Poor health in teachers will impact students' safety/health/learning	Healthy staff and safe schools
Increase of staff out sick	Increased attendance
Low morale	Positive vibes abound
Lack of buy-in	Engagement in programming
Lack of productivity (staff meetings, attendance)	Increased productivity
Increased acting-out behaviors (not checking emails, poor planning and work quality)	Decreased acting-out behaviors
Energy drain	Energy flow
Time and money	Decreased staff turnover

Helping Teachers Help Themselves: The Role of School Leadership

Healthy, balanced teachers have a life outside of school. One of the ways that school leaders can support teachers in their own self-care process is to encourage work-life balance by taking time off when they are off, and providing time for teachers when they need to regroup. A simple strategy to support this idea is to encourage teachers not to assign work over school breaks. Students and teachers both need the time away. Reentry

into the school routine can be taxing—even more so if teachers immediately face a pile of student work that needs to be graded. It never hurts to surprise the teachers with an early dismissal on those in-service days, thus providing them an opportunity to determine for themselves how to spend their time.

Nearly every teaching contract offers sick and personal days. As a school leader, consider encouraging faculty members to take a “mental health day” or other version of leave when just a little time away might offer refreshment and renewal. Leadership has the opportunity to create a school culture that upholds faculty well-being as necessary and required, not selfish or unprofessional. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 53% of public school leavers reported that general work conditions were better in their current position than they had been in teaching (NCES, 2014). Imagine if it were expected that teachers take care of themselves and were provided permission and the necessary resources to do so. Perhaps this shift in expectations would create better working conditions.

It is difficult to provide the requisite patience, clear thinking, warmth, and balance for the job when running on fumes. You cannot produce what you do not possess. In addition to regular school demands, colleagues are often pressed to put in extra time outside the classroom tutoring students, coaching athletes, or tending to a difficult student issue. Even writing college recommendations can be a source of pressure. Teachers are easily overworked and overwhelmed. These are ideal times to encourage one another to take a day to recharge.

Guiding teachers to home in on what matters most in designing curriculum, as we have done in this chapter, presents a leadership opportunity for you to give them license to do this thoughtful and courageous work. You can provide the support, and the necessary permission, for decision-making that emboldens them to implement a “less is more” philosophy. They need to know that they are trusted and will be supported in making decisions that are in the best interest of their students and of themselves.

Factors That Contribute to Teacher Well-Being

- Class size
- Student load
- Number of course preps
- Receiving positive feedback from one’s supervisor
- School safety plans
- School discipline policy
- Grading practices/expectations
- Availability of instructional materials
- Choice in curriculum design
- Common planning time
- Work space
- Duties outside of the classroom
- Quality human interactions and a sense of community
- Professional development on responding to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Having fun together
- Family communication policies
- Time-off policy and support
- Stance toward state testing
- Evaluation practices

Leading by Example: The Role of Self-Care in the Life of a Leader

If school leaders are frayed and running in all directions, it sends a signal that things are dysregulated and chaotic and perhaps there is cause for serious concern. A retired principal friend of ours once shared his wisdom, saying that all things roll down from the top. Whether stream, avalanche, mudslide, or stress: It all flows downhill. And where stress and trauma are concerned, the effect can be crushing. Doing nothing is not a sustainable model for taking care of members of our school communities.

If, as a school leader, you feel as though calm is out of reach, and more often than not you operate in crisis mode, ask yourself:

- ▶ *What support might I need to care for myself?*
- ▶ *Do I have a relevant self-care plan in place?*
- ▶ *What changes can I make in order to experience more balance and well-being?*

Caring for yourself and managing your stress—by saying “no,” doing fewer things better, delegating, and having firm boundaries—sustains the wellness of those down the hill. The school leaders who have lasted and remain effective are those who model strong self-care practices, including an uncanny ability to prioritize, communicate, and share the joy of the work. This is not an easily acquired skill, because the demands on school leadership are many.

Reflections

The key to sustaining the effective work of teaching lies in being able to maintain your well-being. Only you can take care of you.

1. What might I need to say “no” to in order to say “yes” to my physical, emotional, and mental health?

2. What is my self-care plan? With whom can I share it?

(Continued)

(Continued)

3. What prevents me from taking care of myself?

4. What do I need from school leadership in order to do my job effectively and for the long haul?

Toolkit for Tomorrow

In an effort to cultivate self-care, tomorrow I can:

- increase awareness around the need to take care of myself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- identify the signs of burnout.
- name places where I can say “no.”
- interact with colleagues who are energizing, positive, and supportive.
- develop a self-care plan and follow up with an accountability partner.
- assess where I can strive to uncover and discover curricular topics, in exchange for covering content.
- identify a workflow plan that is manageable and sustainable.
- get support from my instructional coach, administrator, or the school counselor in how to implement self-care.
- lead with compassion . . . for myself and for others.

In the End, Be Loving

You became a teacher because you wanted to make a difference in the lives of students. Incorporating self-care practices will allow you to thrive in the career you love—for longer. Commit to caring for yourself with energy, patience, and love. Make the time. Accept the challenge. Honor the commitment. You are worth it. Your students are worth it. You have too much invested in teaching to burn out.