



Tech Talk

The Whole Teacher: Practicing Self-Care

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Abstract

At all times, and particularly during a global pandemic, teachers need to practice self-care so that they may focus on teaching the whole child. Teachers are under an incredible amount of stress during the best of times, and now anxiety is at an all-time high. This Tech Talk article explains ways to promote self-care of the whole teacher focusing on the head, heart, and the hands (mental/cognitive; emotional/spiritual; and physical) using both tech and non-tech options.

Teaching is incredibly stressful, even in the best of times. According to a study conducted by the Robert J. Woods Foundation, 46% of teachers reported having high levels of stress that impacted their health, sleep, teaching, and overall quality of life (Greenburg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). This statistic is pre-COVID. As one can imagine, stress levels have multiplied during the COVID

pandemic. Stress has been compounded by school closures, a shift to online and/or hybrid teaching, quarantining, isolation, anxious students, overwhelmed parents, and lack of training and resources (Luthra, 2021; MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020). Teachers are tired. *USA Today* published an article on January 4, 2021, that states, “The level of stress isn’t sustainable...Teachers have been operating in crisis mode since spring. By now, any surge of energy that fueled them through the pandemic’s initial months has been depleted” (Luthra, 2021, para. 18). The words “new normal” and “not sustainable” are polar to one another, yet teachers find themselves slogging between the two phrases.

People who are in service professions such as teachers, find it easier to assume the role of caregiver, rather than take care of themselves (Coaston, 2017). Teachers are often more outward focused and because the idea of *others before self* takes priority for them, it becomes even more challenging and important that they engage in self-care (MindPeace, 2018).

Teachers and other essential workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic compose nearly half of the workforce. It is reported that 56% of American adults and 64% of frontline workers identified a connection between worry and disturbed sleep, changes in appetite, frequent headaches and stomachaches, difficulty controlling temper, increased alcohol and drug use, and worsening chronic health conditions (Blau, Koebe, & Meyerhofer, 2020). This means that there is little respite from daily stress.

Still, part of being able to teach the whole child connects to being present as “whole” teachers. When we think about the *whole child* approach to education, we recognize that we are referring to more than educating the brain; we are concerned with the head, heart, and the hands (Easton, 1997). In order to teach the whole child, we need whole teachers. Whole teachers practice self-care: they work on developing and protecting their own body, mind, and spirit (Miller, 2010). Now, more than ever, teachers need to practice self-care.

Facets of Self-Care

Self-care can support teachers’ resilience and improve their ability to overcome adversity and adapt to challenging situations, as required during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hanover Research, 2020). It can prevent burnout as well as unnecessary stress (MindPeace, 2018). By focusing on a healthy diet, exercise, better sleep, meditation, and other solutions for stress relief, self-care will help teachers be on top of their game as educators, and it will ultimately benefit student success (Wei, 2018).

Self-care can include many things. Some teachers practice self-care individually; others may find additional encouragement by forming self-care support groups at work and encouraging each other to set common goals. Setting aside time for activities outside of the workplace creates community and a place where teachers can release stress and help them to relax and refuel for the days ahead (Nelson & Gfroerer, 2015). Practicing self-care allows people to be better parents, spouses, caregivers, and friends (Collins, 2005). For optimal health and continued resilience, it is extremely important that teachers take care of themselves mentally, emotionally,

spiritually, and physically. In this article we focus on the head (mental), the heart (emotional/spiritual), and the hands (physical).

Head (Mental/Cognitive)

Mental health has been important long before 2020 and the pandemic that left educators separated from students and navigating a world where teaching expectations changed overnight. However, in these days where some teachers are left teaching only to a computer and others are in a classroom full of masked faces with hybrid instruction, mental health has become even more critical to teacher efficacy and sense of well-being.

In order to deal with rapid changes in both their professional and personal lives, teachers need cognitive flexibility. The ability to switch between mental processes quickly to produce desirable behaviors in response to shifting factors are hallmarks of cognitive flexibility (Dejani & Uddin, 2015). It's about moving between tasks using what is learned from one task and applying it to a new situation (Verdolin, 2019). Cognitive flexibility is highly beneficial to people, including teachers, as it is essential for problem-solving by being open-minded to new solution options, and helping people to be more resilient, confident, and creative (Verdolin, 2019; Watters, 2019). Jennifer Verdolin, Ph.D. offers three ways to improve cognitive flexibility in her *Psychology Today* (2019) blog: 1) Do routine things differently and often. For example, try new foods, drive home a different way, or exercise a different time of day. 2) Pursue new challenges and experiences—~~S~~, such as learning a new language, taking up dancing, and traveling to new places. 3) Meet new people to broaden exposure to different perspectives and worldviews. Engaging in these activities can increase cognitive flexibility, which, for those who need to break out of routines, will improve adaptability, decrease anxiety, and stress, and broaden viewpoints (Verdolin, 2019).

Heart (Emotional/Spiritual)

The emotional and spiritual dimensions of a person are equated here with the heart. Wanda Collins, author of *Embracing Spirituality as an Element of Self-Care* (2005) suggests that self-care is a spiritual act. It requires self-awareness, self-love, and self-worth. Spirituality compels us to make connections with others and with the Creator. She outlines six strategies for self-care: 1) Sabbath keeping (day of rest, time with family, time to play, and time to be still). 2) Finding Holy silence (praying, meditating, and reducing distractions). 3) Expressing gratitude (thankfulness over entitlement, compassion over privilege, and humility over power). 4) Expressing spiritual essence (keeping a prayer journal and seeking and giving forgiveness). 5) Developing a sense of compassion (reaching out to those hurting, practicing kindness, and being aware of suffering). 6) Embracing a principle of stewardship (giving back, serving others, and being a good steward of resources).

Spiritually active people are better able to cope with stress, defuse negative thoughts, have lower rates of depression, have lower incidences of suicide, are happier, and are more resilient (Collins, 2005; LaBarbera & Hetzel, 2016; Ramsey, 2001). They have “[a] sense of purpose, warm belonging, trustful sharing, and increased human joy” (Ramsey, 2001, p. 59).

Hands (Physical)

When we think about the physical facet of self-care, we consider physical activity and exercise, sleep, as well as nutrition.

Physical Activity and Exercise. Physical activity and exercise, while related, are defined differently. Physical activity is any activity that requires movement and expenditure of energy, including walking, housework, leisure activities, gardening, and washing your car as examples. Exercise, on the other hand, is planned, structured physical movement to improve or maintain fitness (Mayo Clinic, 2017). The health benefits of exercise and physical activity are well documented. They are shown to improve mood, self-esteem, and sense of well-being, and reduce anxiety. They release “feel-good” endorphins, take the mind off worries, boost confidence, improve healthy coping skills, may increase social interaction, and can reduce mortality up to 30%. Regular exercise (approximately 30 minutes a day for three to five days a week) can reduce and even prevent high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis, as well as decrease age-related memory and cognitive decline. Adults who engage in regular exercise experience fewer anxiety and depressive episodes (Anderson & Shivakuma, 2013; Mayo Clinic, 2017).

Increasing physical activity is as easy as starting to do what you enjoy, for example, walking, hiking, gardening, etc. Consider rediscovering running, swimming, riding bikes, etc. Let your doctor know your goals to increase your activity. Once cleared to engage in physical activity, start small and set achievable goals. Increase the level of activity over time. Treat exercise as you would any important appointment and change up your physical activity to prevent boredom. It is important to identify and plan for potential obstacles, for example “I do not have enough time” - do 10 minutes of activity three times a day; “the weather is not conducive” - wear the correct clothing or find an indoor location; “it’s too expensive” - check out low-cost recreation and community centers or walk/run in your neighborhood. It is helpful to have an accountability partner, and finally, be kind to yourself if you miss days (Mayo Clinic, 2017; NIDDK, 2017). Tech tools abound in today’s society to help individuals successfully track and even share their physical exercising goals. Apps such as [MAPMYRUN](#) and [STRAVA](#) offer ways to track running, biking, walking, and other physical exercise options while connecting with other users for encouragement and even competition. There are many “virtual” races and team competitions that can help improve motivation as well. [Active.com](#) now allows users to seek “virtual races” anywhere. By signing up for an event, participants may feel more motivated to continue regular exercise when otherwise motivation would wane. Virtual races allow the user to participate and when a virtual race is a multi-day event, users also can use the race as the tracking mechanism.

Furthermore, even weight loss apps such as [noom](#) and [Weight Watchers](#) now add value to tracking exercise. It has been noted that “self-reflection is crucial to the tracking process for stress management and mental well-being” (Kelley, Lee, & Wilcox, 2017). Therefore, using a fitness tracker (such as [FitBit](#), [Garmin](#), or [Apple Watch](#)) or simply using an app such as [STRAVA](#) or [MyFitnessPal](#) that allows a user to track their progress encourages self-reflection. Still, it is important to realize that these tracking mechanisms can have the opposite effect as “People can be overwhelmed by their data and ashamed of what the data reflects” (Kelley, Lee,

& Wilcox, 2017, para. 9). Self-awareness and knowledge of how an individual will respond to this data is key in determining if such tracking will be beneficial. What some may find incredibly helpful in tracking and reflecting on exercise may cause stress for others. It is important for individuals to not only find things that they enjoy doing in the area of exercise but also to ensure that the way in which they participate in these activities is mentally healthy as well.

Sleep. Patrick Finan, Ph.D. in a Johns Hopkins infographic titled, [Sleep Deprivation Effects \(2021\)](#), reports that people who are sleep deprived tend to have more cravings for sweet, salty, and starchy foods. If they receive less than five hours of sleep on average, they are at a 50% greater chance of being obese. They are 36% times more likely to get colorectal cancer and are nearly three times more likely to get type 2 diabetes. An increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, dementia, fatal accidents, and lower immunity response can also be caused by sleep deprivation.

The division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School (2018) recommends seven to eight hours of sleep a night for restorative function of cells. As indicated above, lack of sleep can lead to diabetes, as well as cardiovascular disease, and impaired immune function. Sleep disturbance can be caused by stress itself. While diet and physical exercise may be within the control of the individual, sleep itself both helps manage stress and also becomes disturbed when affected by stress. It is a vicious cycle wherein sleep is needed and then is disturbed by stress - the very thing that requires an increase in sleep. However, there are steps that an individual can take to help increase the likelihood of getting a good night's rest. According to the Sleep Foundation (2020), a strict sleep schedule, a relaxing bedroom atmosphere that is conducive to sleep, the removal of electronics from the sleep area, the reduced consumption of nicotine and caffeine near bedtime, and regular exercise are all ways to improve quality sleep even during times of stress. The Sleep Foundation also recommends that after 15 minutes of attempted sleep, individuals may find sleep easier to attain by getting up and moving to a different part of the living area to do something relaxing (as long as it does not include a blue screen).

Nutrition. *You are what you eat* and what you eat directly affects the function of your brain as well as your mood (Selhub, 2020). When it comes to self-care, feeding your body essential nutrients is vital for optimal function and performance. What we eat affects our ability to endure mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Filling our bodies with clean whole foods such as lean meats, fruits, and vegetables is a great place to start. When we focus on eating clean, we are putting in the optimal fuel for our bodies. Eating clean whole food has been shown to nourish the brain and protect it from oxidative stress (Selhub, 2020). Weight loss/ nutrition apps mentioned above, [noom](#), [MyFitnessPal](#), and [Weight Watchers](#) are an excellent way to better understand the foods you are integrating into your body and to manage consumption.

Also, by setting small achievable goals towards making better nutritional choices, individuals may improve stress reduction, help maintain a healthy weight, and have a more balanced life.

Some of those goals may include meal preparation. Plan one day per week to prepare your meals for the following week. Include healthy snacks for those times you may feel hungry between meals. There are tremendous benefits from taking time to prepare your meals each week, and some of those benefits include stress reduction, weight loss, increased financial savings, and a balanced diet. There is power in preparation (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2021).

Other Ways to Bolster Self Care

Stress is inevitable. Mental health will, at times, feel as though it is suffering. Individuals must be aware of those times and find what works for them to cope through a difficult school year, teaching in a pandemic, or any other stressful time in life. Previously mentioned strategies such as exercise, rest, and nutrition are key, but each person must find what works best for them. For some, escaping in a good book or familiar movie will be ways to destress and unwind. Others, however, may find that hiking, gardening, or otherwise spending time in nature are strategies that help bolster mental health. Still others may seek out spiritual awareness and meditation for dealing with stressful times.

Remember, just as teachers think about the whole child, they also need to think about the “whole” person when it comes to self-care. When thinking about social and emotional health (SEL), what is applicable for students is also applicable for teachers. [CASEL](#) (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning) (2020a) explains five core competencies for social and emotional health that can be taught from childhood to adulthood. They are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. In an effort to support teachers and schools during the COVID pandemic [CASEL](#) provides resources in four key areas: 1) Creating a foundation for social and emotional learning. 2) Attending to the well-being and mutual support among adults. 3) Promoting social and emotional learning for young people. 4) Reflecting on how things are going and adjusting as learning occurs (2020b). CASEL recommends that adults foster supportive relationships with peers to assist in processing feelings, sharing challenges, and building community.

[Thriving Schools by Kaiser Permanente](#) (2021) in their RISE program (Resilience in School Environments) emphasizes the importance of supporting the social and emotional well-being of teachers for creating a positive school climate. They too recommend creating a support network among personnel, as well as brief breaks for tension relief, training in trauma-informed practices, and [redesigning break rooms](#) for teachers to promote functionality, encourage healthy eating, and promote relaxation.

Emotional support can come from one’s community, but it can also come from online sources. One such source is [Talkspace](#), a mobile therapy app that provides online licensed therapists through an online site or mobile app at a reported lower cost than in-person therapists. The Social and Emotional Learning Provider’s Council through CASEL (2020c) offers this list of [remote learning free SEL resources](#). They include [givethx](#), a practice guide for gratitude, and [COVID-19 Stress Supports for Educators](#), a free online course for educators, as well as resources for teachers and parents to assist and support their students/children with remote learning with

free SEL resources. Additionally, there are apps such as [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#) that help users find ways to destress in trying times. On the other hand, for self-care, some may find the need to walk away from technology for a while and be “tech-free.” Others may find that stress has become greater than what they can individually manage and may need to seek an Employee Assistance Program or help from a licensed therapist.

The key to all of these solutions is self-awareness and action towards mitigating that stress.

Conclusion

Eliminating stress for teachers has been a focus for many schools as over this past year, teachers have been asked to endure some of the most challenging times in their lives. To help with stress, some K-12 schools have implemented wellness programs for teachers that focus on the whole teacher (body, mind, and spirit) (Lever, Mathis, & Mayworm, 2017). By acknowledging that stress is a factor in overall well-being of educators, schools have the opportunity to improve the workplace for teachers and thus facilitate better educational experiences for students.

Additionally, as individuals realize their own best responses to stress and times when their mental health is at risk, the ability to quickly and effectively respond becomes more manageable. Sadly, stress will never disappear. Mental health will always need attention. As we become focused on the “whole individual,” teachers become more able and ready to teach the “whole child.” The two concepts should never be separated.

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