

Curbing Teacher Burnout During the Pandemic

Teachers are adapting to a host of exhausting new challenges during the coronavirus. We asked educators and other experts for strategies to help address this new form of burnout.

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RECLAIM YOUR ROUTINE

Normally driven by an early alarm clock and bells throughout the school day, the new fluidity of remote learning has left many teachers feeling unmoored, we've heard.

"The school day never ends. Parents now feel like I'm on call 24/7," summarized one teacher on Instagram, referencing a sense of timelessness that's led to disorientation in the teacher community. "It's weird not to have your normal routine," shared middle school English language arts teacher Stormy Dodge in Kapolei, Hawaii. "It feels like we have no purpose right now."

Scheduling gurus we talked to strongly recommend reclaiming some form of routine for remote learning.

Start by making a list of everything you have to do at specific time slots (like live teaching online), then schedule things you need to do with more flexible timing (like office hours or grading) and keep them consistent and time-boxed every week, writes Marissa King, a teacher and K-12 professional development consultant in Tulsa, Oklahoma. To save time and create more structure, King advises grouping related tasks together: Instead of sending one email at a time, for example, block off a set time in your schedule to answer all new messages at once.

Because we're living in a time of unprecedented stress, make sure to build in time to take care of yourself and prioritize what's essential too. Plan time into your remote learning schedule for breaks, meals, exercise, and sleep, just as you would lesson planning. Setting reminders or alarms on your phone and handwriting out a daily to-do list may help keep you on track.

"At the start of the closure, there was this imperative to work around the clock to provide stability and consistency for students and families. As we move along, that is not sustainable nor is it wise," said Matthew Howell, a middle school principal in Oceanport, New Jersey. "Now it's about balancing workflow. Less is more; it is acceptable to slow down."

CHECK YOUR ERGO

The transition to working from home has not merely involved a location shift for teachers—it's a completely different way of working.

"Working from home is not what teachers signed up for. It's a huge challenge because we are not used to sitting at all during the day," said Heidi Geiges, a middle school computer science, technology, and design teacher in San Carlos, California. That's resulting in some unanticipated new diagnoses: "I'm experiencing tennis elbow in my left arm from being at the computer," said Rebecca Conway, a high school biology teacher from Florence, South Carolina.

Some simple modifications may ease the toll on teachers' bodies. When working at the computer, the screen should be about arm's length away (25 inches) from your face, recommends the American Academy of Ophthalmology. They also suggest following the 20-20-20 rule to reduce eye strain: Every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. Be aware of the contrast and brightness of your screen too—the screen should not be brighter than the room

Most importantly, adults need breaks and exercise just like kids, which can help boost mood, improve mental clarity, and relieve stress. Get up and move at least 15 minutes every two hours, doctors advise, even if it's a walk up and down the stairs. A number of gyms are offering free online classes—no equipment required—during Covid-19.

John Thomas, a first and second-grade teacher in Keene, New Hampshire, has his own novel solution: He's fashioned a standing desk by placing a box on his

kitchen counter, and alternates every 30 minutes between sitting at a desk and standing at the counter to reduce seat time.

TEAM UP WITH PARENTS

Understandably, remote learning has shifted the relationship and intensified communications with parents, our audience of educators says. “The onslaught of emails has definitely increased 10-fold since moving to distance learning,” shared Geiges. “It’s a sinkhole that’s hard to climb out of.”

Geiges and other teachers confided that they can feel obligated to answer parent emails at all hours, but have found it’s important to establish firm boundaries to stay sane. This translates to practices like not checking email on your phone after you close your computer; not syncing your work email to your personal inbox; or setting strict time blocks when you respond.

At times, the relationship with parents can get strained, educators told us, but it can be improved by making sure communications aren’t solely tied to the nitty-gritty of assignments. To warm up a relationship, share positive things a student has done, call home to see how parents are doing, or record a short video or email a note to thank parents for their help, some teachers suggested.

When it comes to school work, Barnes recommends streamlining information. “We realized that our fifth graders have little experience with email and were losing the Google Meet invites and getting confused about the schedule. This was driving parents crazy,” said Barnes, whose school now keeps all Google Meet invites at the same times each week, tracked in a single document (with links) that lists all the dates and times, along with assignments.

Quick reminders can also help. Research shows alerting parents in easily accessible formats (like texts) can help boost parent involvement and improve student engagement and performance

TAP INTO YOUR HAPPY SPACE

Used to being the “sage on the stage,” teachers have told us they’re struggling to manage the instability caused by the pandemic and no longer feel confident they have the answers. Veteran teachers have compared the feeling to being a first-year teacher all over again.

To maintain a level head amid tremendous uncertainty, experts advise keeping focused on what matters most: Reminding yourself you are still a skilled teacher, even if teaching looks different than it used to. To cope, regularly remembering the reasons “why you became a teacher,” or the students’ lives you touched, may ease feelings that you have no control over your life, writes Kelly McGonigal.

Don’t be so hard on yourself, either, says Vicki Davis, a director of instructional technology in Albany, Georgia, who keeps an “Atta Girl” folder of nice notes she’s received over the years, along Pinterest boards of “happy triggers” that lift her spirits during hard times. And Mylien Duong, a senior research scientist at Committee for Children, suggests keeping a gratitude journal (like this electronic one available for educators), which research shows can reduce stress.

When it comes to students, Sherine Aboelezz, a former high school English teacher and now college writing instructor for Georgetown University, uses a similar approach.

“While no one has the answers, I’m starting to feel the best thing I can do is help students manage and cope with their uncomfortable feelings,” said Aboelezz. “Instead of quickly assuring them that things will be over soon, I ask them, ‘What can you do right now that will make this hardship feel a little easier?’”

As a teacher of online courses for many years, I've grappled with working from home. Whether we're planning and teaching virtually or managing projects, working from home for extended lengths of time can be challenging as work time blends into personal time. It's too easy to slip into being on call 24/7 as we tackle emerging challenges and requests from learners anywhere and at any time.

But setting boundaries that separate work time from personal time is only a first step. To help and support others, we must become avid caretakers of ourselves.

Tending to our personal health seems important but also really difficult in situations like the current pandemic, when our time feels consumed with urgent work issues. We may feel that if we don't get a task done, our students will suffer or programs will fail. However, if we become mentally exhausted, overtired, or drained of energy, we risk a complete shutdown mentally or physically—and at that point, no tasks will get done.

Fortunately, there are many ways that we can take care of ourselves so that we can meet the needs of others from home. The following are my suggestions for personal care and sharing with others. They are just suggestions: The most important thing is to think about the three areas—physical, mental, and social care—and do what works best for you and what you know you'll be able to do regularly.

PHYSICAL CARE: SLEEP AND EXERCISE

Tending to basic needs is important for managing stress and replenishing the energy reserves needed for tackling tasks. Numerous studies reinforce the value of adequate sleep—seven to eight hours a night for adults. One value of sleep is that it helps “maintain many vital functions” of the body, giving cells and tissues

worn out by daily life time to recover, according to a research review by the Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Pair sleep with good eating habits and an exercise routine. It's no secret that exercise can promote good sleep, as well as provide the energy needed to perform throughout the day.

Simple ideas for getting better sleep and regular exercise include:

- Maintain a routine that includes a consistent bedtime. Plan to get the rest you need so that each day you can better address your students' needs.
- Explore sleep apps that offer real-time data regarding your sleep hours and patterns. Apps vary in accuracy, but they may capture a picture of your depth of sleep and wakefulness. The site Tom's Guide offers an updated list of sleep apps. Sleep Cycle is my current go-to. Some fitness bands include sleep tracking.
- Establish an exercise schedule. This could include quick successes such as a walk or bike ride. I sometimes walk up and down the stairs in my house for 30 minutes or ride a stationary bike. Too busy? Set aside 15 or 20 minutes a day to walk or pace inside or outside.
- Try out fitness apps like DownDog and Peloton, YouTube videos, or fitness console games like Just Dance or Ring Fit Adventure. An extra feature of many fitness apps is the ability to document your food intake, which can be important especially if you're concerned about stress eating.

MENTAL CARE: MINDFULNESS AND LEARNING

Set up blocks of time for work and family—but also for yourself. Loved ones see you at home working and naturally want your time. Share meals and walks, or other breaks from work, but while family and work colleagues both need your

attention, protecting some personal time can help you recharge and be present for them.

Schedule activities that promote calm: meditating, growing spiritually, doing yoga, completing puzzles, or playing digital or physical games. I play Minecraft to relax and subconsciously generate ideas for creative learning. There are helpful apps that support a Zen state of mind—my favorite is Calm.

Try to keep learning by reading articles, listening to podcasts or favorite playlists, and watching instructional videos. Growing your professional practice and hobbies is valuable to rejuvenating yourself.

SOCIAL CARE: STAY CONNECTED WITH OTHERS

Teachers are generally very able to keep track of time in the classroom, but we may be more challenged when working at home. Between lesson planning, researching learning experiences, and attending professional meetings, it's possible to forget to eat and stay connected with friends and family. Since a strength of virtual learning is access to the world, use those same resources for personal growth.

Stay in contact with family and friends by using video conference tools like Zoom, Google Hangout, Skype, WhatsApp, and FaceTime. Video meetings are better than a phone call—when you have a good connection—because you can see the people. Communication is more than voice—it benefits from facial expressions and other visual cues.

Have meals and conversations online with family and friends. Every Tuesday, my family has lunch with my parents using FaceTime or Zoom on a phone or tablet. Seeing each other and sharing updates really lifts my parents' and my kids' spirits. There are other avenues for socializing at a distance: Participate in discussion groups or book clubs. You might really benefit from seeing a smile,

even if it's just on the screen. Social distancing doesn't have to mean social isolation.

We are role models for our students and our children, and we can set an example and practice what we teach about lifelong learning—which is now more important than ever. Managing our physical, mental, and social well-being can give us the energy to be present to those we are responsible for and set an example for them of how to cope with our tough current situation.

Things to Remember

- **Periods 1-4: Mondays & Thursdays**
- **Periods 5-8: Tuesdays & Fridays**
- **Wellness Wednesdays: PLC @ 10:00 A.M. & Office Hours**
- **Meet with students via Webex during their scheduled class times**
- **Students should sign-in to each class**
- **Remember to complete the Teacher Instructional Form at the end of each day**
- **Utilize the Google Form for daily sign-in**
- **Update your Grade Books & communicate with parents**

Weekly Calendar

Monday, May 11, 2020

Periods 1-4

Communicate with Students

Monitor Student Work

Tuesday, May 12, 2020

Periods 5-8

Communicate with Students

Monitor Student Work

Wednesday, May 13, 2020

Wellness Wednesdays

PLC @ 10:00

Office Hours

Communicate with Students & Parents

Thursday, May 14, 2020

Periods 1-4

Communicate with Students

Monitor Student Work

Friday, May 15, 2020

Periods 5-8

Communicate with Students

Monitor Student Work

Have a SAFE weekend!