

Self-Care Strategies for Educators During the Coronavirus Crisis

Supporting Personal Social and Emotional Well-Being

Christina Pate • May 2020

With many lives significantly disrupted, millions of students at home, and entire communities sheltering in place, the challenges and stresses that educators face today are unprecedented. In this rapidly changing context, teachers are called upon to continue educating their students, often teaching from home while also supporting families and communities in new ways. But in order to support others, educators must support themselves first. In fact, across helping professions generally, self-care is considered an ethical imperative.

This brief is addressed to educators who face the stresses of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting school closures, online service provision, and quarantine conditions. The brief offers practical information and guidance on self-care in these challenging times. It builds on a growing research base about self-care,¹ as well as on new resources currently being developed during this period,² along with WestEd's extensive experience in education, public health, and wellness services.

Many definitions of self-care exist, which generally refer to:

- » Paying adequate attention to one's own physical and psychological health and wellness
- » Taking an active role to preserve, protect, or improve one's own health and well-being

The guidance here aims to help you attend to this kind of self-care so that you can most effectively continue to educate and support those who depend on you.

1 See, for example, Greenberg, M. T., Brown J. L., Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Teacher stress and health effects on teachers, students, and schools*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University. <http://prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf430428.pdf>; Von der Embse, N., Ryan, S., Gibbs, T., & Mankin, A. (2019). Teacher stress interventions: A systematic review. *Psychology in the Schools*, 56(8), 1328–1343.

2 See guidance from California's surgeon general https://covid19.ca.gov/pdf/caregivers_and_kids_california_surgeon_general_stress_busting_playbook_draft_v2_clean_ada_04072020v2.pdf and from WestEd <https://www.wested.org/covid-19-resources/>

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Guiding Questions

Before exploring the self-care strategies described in this brief, identify your own priorities by considering the following questions:

- What mindsets and strategies have supported you in the past when managing change and unexpected events? In what ways might those approaches apply during this “new normal”?
- In what ways do you experience a sense of belonging and connection when you are with others in person? How might you adapt these strategies to develop and maintain healthy connections remotely?
- Knowing your needs and limits, and clearly communicating what you need (as well as what you will or will not allow), can be challenging during these times. What boundaries do you need to be clear about, and which ones can be more flexible during this time? How can you honor your own boundaries while respecting those of others, which may be different?

Healthy Mindsets and Behaviors

Create a New Normal.

» **Be realistic (and gentle) with yourself.**

Set a new baseline. Most people have not been prepared to use virtual tools as their primary way of interacting, and most schools were not prepared to shift their existing curricula into a distance learning format. So while you will want to create effective and meaningful lessons and activities, don't expect to do it all at once right away. Allow the time and space necessary to figure out this “new normal.” Give yourself the permission for trial and lots of error. Iterate, but also be patient, prioritize, and let some things go.

» **Reduce the workload for yourself and your students.**

Experiencing a lot of stress and change has diminished everyone's mental capacity to handle the load. Allow yourself to reduce the load. Consider implementing the same lessons as normal, but in smaller amounts (of course your

school/district may have existing protocols around pacing and workload as well). Consider requiring less reading and less response from students. For example, if you normally assign five word problems, consider cutting that to two or three, reducing the mental and emotional burden on yourself, your students, and families supporting students.

» **Shift the focus from academic content to positive, healthy relationships.**

As you reduce some of the workload, prioritize positive interactions to connect with students and families on a personal, rather than an academic, level. What matters most right now is how students feel as they are learning.

Practice Self-Awareness.

Being aware of and accepting your own thoughts and feelings, and adjusting your actions accordingly, are essential these days. However, getting stuck in your feelings is all too easy when you're worried about your own health and safety and the

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well-being of your family and community. Experiencing feelings is important, as long as you do not “become” your feelings. The following points are helpful for facing significant challenges and high amounts of stress.

» **Stay calm and focused.**

Studies show that mindfulness practices can reduce emotional reactivity and support decision-making.³ Sitting or walking in nature, physical exercise, or talking with a good friend can also help. Bottom line: Do what works for you. Think about strategies that have been helpful for you in the past and try applying those first.

» **Become aware of the stories you’re telling yourself.**

Consider whether the way you think and talk about the current circumstances is realistic or primarily fear-based. If you find that your thoughts are mostly rooted in fear and you’re having trouble staying calm or focused, allow and accept your feelings and give yourself permission to not force or push things. For example, if you have a live class or an interaction scheduled with a student or family, consider ways

to reschedule or reconnect when your mind is feeling steadier and more stable.

» **Know that emotions (like a virus) can be contagious – both positively and negatively.**

Do your best to keep fear and panic at bay and support healing and well-being by modeling calm behavior and emoting positively and optimistically. For example, when you’re feeling overwhelmed, pause, take a breath, notice the thoughts in your mind and the sensations in your body, and give yourself a moment (or more) to relax your mind and body before responding or making a decision. How you feel (and how you appear in interactions) will have a significant influence on how your students feel and how they approach their work.

Be Optimistic and Solution-Focused.

» **Take a solution-focused approach.**

Rather than focusing on problems or getting into “analysis paralysis,” start searching for solutions. You might do so through conversations or by individually considering alternative solutions, challenging previously held beliefs, considering perspectives outside the self or immediate group, reframing issues (e.g., shifting negative framing to positive), and so on.

» **Shift from pessimism to optimism.**

Often it’s normal to think of what *can’t* be done before thinking of what *can*, but don’t get stuck there. Immediately redirect your focus forward (versus backward). Take perspective and be patient with yourself – have confidence that you can figure out what to do. Focus on what you like and want rather than on all the things you don’t like or want. These simple shifts can have a profound impact on your well-being and can shift how others respond to you as well.

3 Studies on emotional reactivity include: Gu, J., Strauss, C., Bond, R., & Cavanagh, K. (2015). How do mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction improve mental health and wellbeing? A systematic review and meta-analysis of mediation studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 37, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2015.01.006>; Roemer, L., Williston, S. K., & Rollins, L. G. (2015). Mindfulness and emotion regulation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 3, 52–57. Studies on decision-making include: Chiesa, A., & Serretti, A. (2010). A systematic review of neurobiological and clinical features of mindfulness meditations. *Psychological Medicine*, 40(8), 1239–1252; Shapiro, S. L., Jazaieri, H., & Goldin, P. R. (2012). Mindfulness-based stress reduction effects on moral reasoning and decision making. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(6), 504–515.

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» **Practice reframing.**

When faced with challenging new situations, distinguish the positive aspects from the negative. For example, as shown in the table to the right, you might make a two-column list and, in one column, list all the negative aspects of your circumstance. Then go back and reframe each point to identify something positive to list in the second column. Some call this positive reframing the “silver lining” or “blessing in disguise.”

» **Look for opportunities in the challenges.**

Search for meaning and lessons within the challenges and uncertainties.

» **Show gratitude.**

Practicing gratitude can begin to shift your perspective from pessimism to optimism. Taking some time to express appreciation and gratitude can help yourself and others through these challenging times. You might do so through personal journaling (e.g., writing three things you’re grateful for each morning upon waking, or each evening before sleeping), writing gratitude letters (to friends, colleagues, family, students), speaking your appreciation (calling friends, colleagues, families, students), posting on social media, and so on.

» **Demonstrate compassion.**

Refraining from judging or criticizing others during this time can be difficult, particularly in regard to those who have responses much different from yours. Connect with others through active listening, seeking to understand rather than be understood, and strengthening feelings of concern for others — not just for those suffering from the virus, but for those suffering from fear or panic as well.

» **Have compassion for yourself as well.**

Be kind to yourself. Try not to judge and shame

Negative	Positive
<p>Social distancing</p> <p>(we’re forced to stay away from people and our favorite places)</p>	<p>Physical distancing</p> <p>(we’re keeping ourselves and others healthy and safe)</p>
<p>Isolation and loneliness</p> <p>(I’m feeling alone and disconnected from people, and feeling like I don’t belong anywhere)</p>	<p>Solidarity and solitude</p> <p>(we’re unifying around a cause, and creating opportunities for alone, quiet time to think, relax, and recover)</p>
<p>Remote work + homeschooling children</p> <p>(there are too many people crowded in the house with too much to do all at the same time)</p>	<p>Connected and involved</p> <p>(although life is still busy, I am connecting more now with my family, friends, etc., and I’m able to be more involved in my child’s education)</p>

yourself. Treat yourself the way you would a dear friend. Remember that everyone (yourself included) is doing the best they can with what they know, what they have, and where they are in life.

Foster Openness, Flexibility, Adaptability, and Humor.

You undoubtedly have called upon flexibility and adaptiveness in other circumstances prior to the pandemic, perhaps to deal with sick children or schedule changes. The same kinds of skills —

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shifting mindsets, perspectives, and actions when unexpected events arise — are important now more than ever. Even finding the humor amid the stress can be a healthy coping mechanism. Mindsets which are critical for remaining calm, thinking clearly, and making conscious choices (rather than succumbing to being overwhelmed or chronically anxious) can be developed and improved in various ways, including the following:

- » **Take physical and mental breaks.**
These include breaks from screens of all kinds — computers, phones, televisions, and so on. Breaks can also include moving from one room to another (if possible, otherwise, shifting your position in a room) or moving from indoors to outdoors (or simply finding a natural light source or opening a window).
- » **Find opportunities for humor and laughter.**
Doing so may include having fun conversations with colleagues or friends, or watching funny movies, videos, television shows, and so on.
- » **Engage in mind-body activities.**
Try mindfulness, jogging, yoga, exercise, listening or dancing to music, taking a walk outdoors, or other relaxing or invigorating activities.

Identity, Connectedness, and Belonging

Be Intentional About Connecting With Colleagues.

Connecting with colleagues can provide a social and emotional context for your remote work. As facilitating learning in these times is particularly difficult, virtual connection with friends and colleagues who understand your circumstances can help now more than ever.

Initiate Contact With Students and Families.

If you don't have virtual access to students, you can send letters or create and mail postcards, make phone calls, or schedule times to walk or drive by to safely wave to or speak with students from a distance near their home. If you have virtual access to students, send them messages, create online hubs for connecting, or offer "community hours" during which they can check in with you about nonacademic topics. Additional ways to connect are found in a related brief from WestEd titled [*Community-Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis: Practical Tips for School Staff and Administrators*](#).

Healthy Boundaries and Interactions

Having healthy boundaries means knowing what your limits are and clearly communicating what you will and will not allow, as well as what you need. Establishing clear and healthy boundaries can support health and wellness for all. Some people need more connection and interaction — physically, socially, or mentally — while others need more quiet time and solitude. It's important to understand what you need and clearly communicate that to others.

Attend to Physical and Social Boundaries.

- » **Find a place where you can be alone.**
Even if for a brief time, seek some time alone at least once per day. The place could be a yard, sidewalk, bathroom, porch, or a vehicle. If you are taking care of children alone, find times when you can claim some solitude, such as during naptime or after bedtime.
- » **Communicate when you need space.**
Create a norm that conveys all members of the household and school community need

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“space” and that it’s normal and healthy to communicate that need. You may need to create a word, phrase, or signal to indicate when you need space, and ask that it be honored any time that prompt is used by any family or community member. Equally important is to communicate when you need more connection. Ask others if there are ways you can connect that respect their needs and boundaries.

- » **Set boundaries around physical touch.**
Doing so can be challenging with family members, but find ways to create physical boundaries that respect each other’s need to protect one’s health. For example, your neighbor or family outside the home may think a quick visit is okay. But just because they are friends or family does not mean you have to allow them visiting. Determine what is right for you and check with federal guidelines on safe and healthy practices. Practice saying “no.”

Consider Social-Emotional and Mental Well-Being.

- » **Recognize that everyone responds differently to stress.**
Accept your own feelings. Understand that others’ thoughts, emotions, and reactions or responses are their responsibility, not yours. You can set healthy boundaries with others around what you will and will not allow. For example, you might say, “I know that you’re anxious and afraid right now, but I need you to speak calmly and respectfully to me.”
- » **Respect others’ decisions but know what’s right for you.**
If you need to, you can set boundaries on conversations. For example, you might say, “Talking about this again is making me more anxious. Can we talk about something else?”

- » **Have compassion for yourself and others.**
There is no need to judge yourself or others about thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Set Boundaries for Work.

- » **Create communication norms and expectations – for yourself, colleagues, students, and families.**
Create clear and consistent messaging to students and families. Elicit feedback from students and families and ensure that communication is reciprocal. Be clear about when you are and are not available, especially given that emails from students and parents can arrive at all hours. Don’t feel compelled to reply to emails immediately. Even if you are working from home, you can still set official work hours.
- » **If you are homeschooling your own children while also being a teacher for others, be extra realistic with yourself.**
Create schedules for clarity and stability for yourself and others. Identify times when you can focus on your work and other times when you can focus attention on your children. Be gentle with yourself. Know when to reach out for help. Let your employer and/or your child’s teacher know if you’re struggling to manage both responsibilities and see if there are opportunities for support.
- » **Create a workspace for yourself.**
Even if you’re in a shared room or house, create a physical space (ideally not where you sleep) that is designated for your work during the day. Make it functional, supportive, and happy.

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» **Take more breaks.**

Adults need a break after 20 minutes of staring at a screen. Also, take time away from your computer for meals. Add break times in your schedule if you need to.

Be Aware of Your Intake of News, Media, and Other Information Sources.

» **Monitor the amount (and type) of information you take in.**

Be a critical consumer of information, including from family, friends, and the media. To help avoid feeling like life is out of your control, you can control *what* and *how much* information you seek and consume. When you do consume, focus on facts. Consult reliable and up-to-date sources. Limit the amount of time spent talking about COVID-19 with family, friends, and colleagues. Limit social media to fact-based and reliable sources. Limit

the amount of time spent reading, listening to, or watching the news and other information sources.

» **Consider setting a boundary with yourself or others around media or certain topics.**

For example, you might say, “Watching this before bed makes falling asleep difficult for me. Can we watch something else?”

When to Seek Help

Friends, families, and colleagues can be great sources of support when you’re feeling stressed or down. A low mood or some anxiety is normal, but intense, persistent, or prolonged feelings of hopelessness, despair, or anxiety are not. Seek professional help if you feel that fear or hopelessness is significantly disrupting your daily functioning. Many mental health providers are offering remote sessions by phone or video if needed.

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