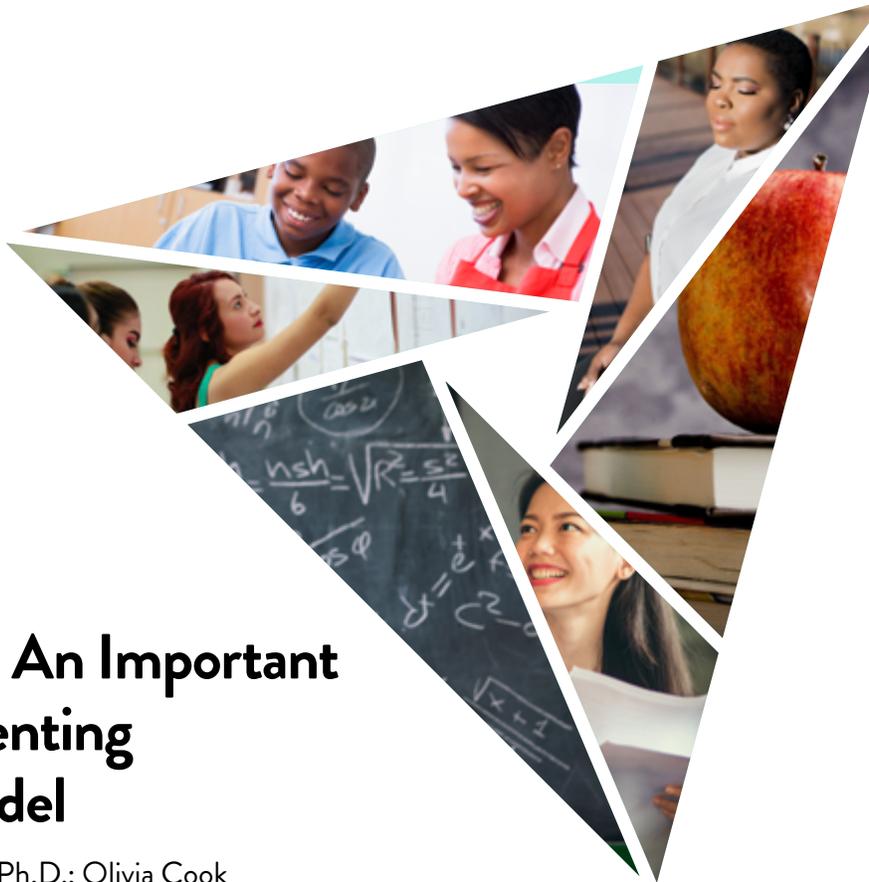




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Self-Care and Wellness: An Important Focus for Staff Implementing a School Responder Model

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INTRODUCTION: The pathway from school misbehavior to exclusionary school discipline and eventual entry into the justice system is disproportionately populated with young people who have behavioral health needs. A school responder model (SRM) is a promising strategy that has worked to reroute students with behavioral health conditions from the juvenile justice system to a pathway that includes service provision and school inclusion. This framework is grounded in collaboration across the education, community-based behavioral health, and justice systems and in partnership with families and youth. To accomplish this, school staff engage in a behavioral health response that provides behavioral health screening and connection to clinical assessment and services. By engaging in a brief screening process for students, those who are “at risk” are identified and can be referred for clinical assessment and are linked to relevant community services.

In an SRM, teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, and other staff may, at any time, serve as the responder for students with behavioral health needs. Working with students who may have experienced trauma, have mental health conditions or substance use disorders, or live in poverty, among other unique needs, can be stressful for school staff seeking to support and assist these students. This stress can be exacerbated by school cultures and climates, whether that entails ongoing policy changes with poor implementation or communication around them, strict policies around personal time, high coworker turnover, a shortage of substitute teachers, and many other stressors. Without proper external supports and self-care, educators may experience burnout or compassion fatigue while navigating care pathways with their students—in addition to their other roles and responsibilities. Approaches, programs, and recommendations provided here can help to promote well-being and self-care for teachers, social workers, and other staff working with at-risk students in an SRM.

It is estimated that half a million, or 15 percent, U.S. teachers leave their positions each year¹ with 41 percent leaving the profession within their first 5 years.² These turnover rates are unsurprising, however, due to the what is known about the stressors experienced by educators. Studies consistently highlight the stress-burdens associated with teaching, including burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS). Examples of stressors for

educators can include the number of students in one class, increasingly challenging behaviors of students, a shortage of student support service providers, scarcity of up to date textbooks and other teaching resources, ongoing policy changes and poor implementation of new practices, lack of support from administrators, little involvement of student families, and high demands for the achievement of academic benchmarks, among many others. As educator stress levels rise, it is increasingly important that self-care and wellness be priorities on both individual and organizational levels in schools.

Understanding Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma and Their Impact

In the discourse around the effects the education system can have on the adults in schools—teachers, administrators, support staff, and others—these terms are often used interchangeably; however, they have different meanings.

The symptoms of STS may include increased anxiety, intrusive thoughts related to their students’ traumatic stories, fatigue, feeling numb or detached from students, decision-making difficulties, or a desire to withdraw from people or situations that activate difficult thoughts and emotions.⁶

While STS refers to behaviors and emotions that arise from helping or wanting to help an individual who has experienced/is experiencing trauma, vicarious trauma is a process of ongoing change that happens when an individual cares about other people who have experienced trauma, and feels a commitment or responsibility to help those people. Cumulatively, this process of caring and the costs of caring can lead to changes in “psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.”⁷ For educators, vicarious trauma can manifest in numerous ways, including feelings of hopelessness associated with their students, irritation, sleep challenges, and dreaming about their students’ traumatic experiences. These symptoms can impact staff members’ personal lives in ways that include feeling disconnected from family and friends, avoiding activities that used to be enjoyable, and having less empathy and emotional availability for others.⁸ Similarly, the term burnout refers to the feeling of powerless and having job dissatisfaction, low morale, loss of enthusiasm for the work, decreased energy or motivation and feeling overwhelmed by the workload.⁹

DEFINITIONS

Burnout: A state of emotional and mental exhaustion caused by stress, which can lead to lack of interest, low morale, and dissatisfaction.

Compassion fatigue: Known as the “cost of caring,” this is the sense of being overwhelmed, emotional numbing, and irritability people may experience when serving others who have experienced adversity in a helping capacity.³

Secondary traumatic stress: Reactions that are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms but that are experienced by those who are helping persons who have experienced actual traumatic events and are coping with PTSD or related clinical symptoms.

Self-care: “The ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider.”⁴

Vicarious trauma: A shift in worldview and personal beliefs that often involve a sense of oneself, the world and other people being unsafe, which takes place when an individual cares about and feels responsible for helping other people who have experienced traumatic events and are coping with PTSD or related clinical symptoms.

Wellness: A conscious, deliberate process that requires a person to become aware of and make choices for a more satisfying lifestyle.⁵

Burnout is a cumulative process and a response to on-the-job stress. Burnout can have an impact on physical health and wellness, and is associated with insomnia¹⁰ and depression.¹¹ Burnout doesn't necessarily impact the educators' worldview like STS or vicarious trauma and is usually resolved through a change in jobs. As educators seek this resolution, the field has come to experience the current shortage of educators and turnover rate in the education field.

These issues are clearly connected to poor outcomes among school staff and their students, making it important for staff to be attuned to self-care and wellness principles. These concerns are widely prevalent and have a significant impact on school staff.

Prevalence of Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Burnout among School Staff

While exploring self-care among educators is a relatively new investigation, the extant literature does illuminate the growing need for self-care and wellness practices among this population. Teacher stress and burnout have been empirically examined using various validated processes, and this research is becoming increasingly available as attention to this concern grows.

A 2017 survey of close to 5,000 educators showed nearly 66 percent of educators feel stressed out.¹² In 2015, over 30,000 educators participated in an American Federation of Teachers (AFT) survey, with 73 percent reporting that they often find work stressful, and are likely to feel both emotionally and physically depleted and exhausted at the end of their workday. An ongoing study indicates that 65 percent of teachers (n=6,993) reported showing signs of burnout, with another 20 percent noting they were at risk of burnout.¹³ Seemingly, the majority of educators are not only experiencing high levels of stress, but they are experiencing or at risk for burnout.

How Is Teacher Stress Measured?

There are several tools used to measure educator burnout. One commonly used instrument is the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educators Survey.¹⁴ This instrument measures three aspects of burnout in educators: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of accomplishment. Multiple questions about the frequency of stressful work events are posed using a Likert Scale, zero being “never” and six being “every day.”¹⁵

Another tool used, The Professional Quality of Life,¹⁶ allows for assessing compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue. The ProQOL is a free 30-item self-report tool that measures the positive and negative aspects of caring. Once the ProQOL has been administered and scored, one's level of compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue can be analyzed.¹⁷ The ProQOL is a revision of the Compassion Fatigue Self Test,¹⁸ which has been noted as the most popular instrument for compassion fatigue.

The AFT Quality of Worklife Survey (2015) has been used to measure teacher stress while also determining the most common sources of that stress.

Other scales that exist for measuring stress, vicarious trauma, or burnout among school staff include the Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Test (1996), the Compassion Fatigue Scale (2002), Compassion Fatigue—Short Scale (2006), and the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (2004), among others.¹⁹

Teachers who do not feel supported by supervisors, colleagues, or their students' parents may experience professional burnout.²⁰ There may be gender differences in these experiences. Female teachers may be more likely to experience compassion fatigue—yet less likely to experience burnout—when compared to their male peers.²¹ Those teachers—regardless of gender—working at high-poverty schools experienced higher rates of STS than those in low-poverty schools.²² High-poverty schools can be rural or urban schools. In the latter, a study of urban public-school teachers found that 90 percent of teachers (n=111) were within high risk range for compassion fatigue, and 40 percent of teachers had high risk of burnout with another 49 percent displaying moderate risk.²³ There are opportunities for all teachers to benefit from organizational support and self-management skills for avoiding or managing compassion fatigue, burnout, and STS.

There are attributes that increase the experiences of stress for teachers, however, these stress levels and concerns are nonetheless a widely universal experience for educators. As these issues become increasingly prominent and there is expanded awareness about these concerns, new information and supports are now available around practices that can promote wellness for teachers and other school staff.

Responses to Supporting Educator Self-Care

While it is a relatively new area of exploration, there is a growing body of research available on the importance of self-care and wellness promotion for educators and other school staff. The adoption of such practices and strategies among school staff have been shown to improve well-being and decrease risks associated with STS, vicarious trauma, and burnout. Below are a few examples of approaches utilized to help alleviate some of the stressors experienced by educators and support their well-being. These examples were selected for their perceived ease of access and subsequent implementation in schools, as well as for their promise or existing evidence of effectiveness. The strategies can be folded into existing SRM efforts. An SRM implementation team can, for example, also lead the implementation of these models, or a smaller wellness committee subset can be established to oversee these strategies.

Resilience Strategies for Educators: Techniques for Self-Care and Peer Support | U.S. Department of Education Secondary Traumatic Stress Training Model

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the devastating oil spill that followed, local educators struggled with compassion fatigue and secondary trauma as they watched the hardships experienced by their students and students' families. In response, local administrators coordinated with national experts Drs. Marleen Wong and Robin Gurwitsch, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, to develop a toolkit to support educator well-being and help those experiencing compassion fatigue. This led to the U.S. Department of Education's development of a series of trainings on responding to stressful and traumatic events in schools.

The training model created includes discussion of the definitions of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, and STS, as well as the impact of the latter on teachers. This 7-hour training contains a section on self-care, where attendees can participate in exercises, and explore self-care from multiple dimensions, such as physical, intellectual, financial, and emotional. While learning and discussing strategies for engaging in self-care, participants develop a self-care plan.²⁴

As of the date of this publication, there are no studies available that illustrate the efficacy of the training model implemented by the U.S. Department of Education. However, the application of the

model is currently in practice and an electronic search using “Resilience Strategies for Educators: Techniques for Self-Care and Peer Support” shows that this model has been promoted by several entities, including the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. The trainings have been offered across the country, hosted by groups such as the Alaska School Counselor Association, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, Kentucky Department of Education, Wisconsin Safe & Healthy Schools Center, Professional Learning Services, and Nebraska Department of Education, among others.

Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) for Teachers

The Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) for Teachers curriculum targets emotion skills instruction, mindful awareness and stress reduction, as well as caring and listening techniques. The ultimate objective of the program is to build resilience in educators who experience great levels of burnout and STS. The program is designed to be delivered over a period of four to five weeks, and includes four day-long sessions with coaching available via phone and internet to support teachers between sessions.²⁵

Through use of a randomized experimental trial, a recent study enlisted 226 kindergarten to fifth-grade teachers from 36 urban elementary schools in a 30-hour in-person training, which included intersession phone coaching sessions. The researchers found that participation in CARE for Teachers had statistically significant effects on the adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness, and teaching efficacy of teachers. Additionally, the psychological and physical distress experienced by teachers significantly decreased following participation in the program.²⁶ Overall, CARE is a program that has been demonstrated to improve well-being and decrease stress among participants. These improvements translate to the school environment, where teachers are more sensitive to the needs of students following participation in this program and there is a positive impact on emotional support in the classroom.²⁷

Building upon this research, a 2018 case study was conducted to explore elementary teachers’ experiences following participation in the CARE for Teachers intervention.²⁸ Using a subsample of teachers from the larger randomized control trial described above, teachers were interviewed over the phone in hopes of operationalizing exactly what sources caused them the greatest amount of stress, and what protective factors exist to combat STS for them. Mindful awareness, or taking time “to stop, breathe, observe, and connect with [one’s] inner experience,”²⁹ were discovered to be one of the most prominent factors of stress reduction in this qualitative study. Additionally, self-care practices, community support, and practices focused on emotion regulation significantly affected the resilience of teachers. One participant in the study noted that simply engaging in a breathing exercise helped with stress management. In describing their response to an aggravating situation at school following the CARE for Teachers Training, this participant said: “Instead of me flying off the handle, I learned to take deep breaths, kind of relax before I respond. You know, do a little mini time-out for myself.”³⁰ Putting research to practice, CARE for Teachers has been piloted in California, Colorado, New York, and Pennsylvania.³¹

ABC Approach

The ABC approach is intended to address symptoms of vicarious trauma by focusing on three themes: awareness, balance, and connection, when thinking about ways to address the impact exposure to other’s traumatic experiences has on a secondary party.³² For educators, having an awareness about what is personally being felt will be helpful in prompting thoughts about

what may be needed in that moment. Often, taking time away from a stressful situation can be helpful. This may involve a teacher taking a time out, which can include taking a moment for deep breathing, stepping outside, or connecting with a peer confidant. Taking necessary time away can also include taking a “mental health day” if someone is not able to bring their best self to work. One study on absenteeism among K-12 teachers in Texas found that use of mental health days was increasing among educators, with the day off being an opportunity—for some—to check-in with oneself and to have an opportunity to “change your perspective on things.”³³ Ultimately, awareness means being conscious and in touch with what is taking place in difficult moments, as well as what it needed to get through a given circumstance in a healthy, safe, and productive way.

In addition to awareness, the ABC Approach emphasizes the importance of balance. According to the model, balance is about being able to establish practices that provide perimeters between one’s professional and personal life, and such balance is seen as essential to self-care. Spending long hours at work without any time to rest, relax, or refresh can be detrimental to educators’ health and well-being. The reality is, however, that “U.S. employees typically leave about 429 million paid vacation days on the table every year.”³⁴ For some, at times, it may feel selfish or wrong to put their needs first; however, finding the right balance between work and personal life can make a significant difference in productivity and self-care.

The third theme in the ABC approach notes the ways in which people are wired for human connection and as Cook states, “We may not like the fact that we are wired such that our well-being depends on our connections with others, but the facts are the facts.”³⁵ Spending time with family and friends, and nurturing social connections, can be an essential component of self-care. Additionally, being a member of a social group or club also builds beneficial relationships. These interactions can provide an outlet and opportunity for comradery and shared understanding. Strong connections can deliver protection and support, especially during challenging times.

A self-care workshop hosted for educators in Michigan by LivingSLOW™ incorporated tenets from the ABC approach in a session entitled, “Living SLOW in a Fast-Paced World.” This workshop was conducted in August 2017 and consisted of a 2-hour session that provided 150 participants with an opportunity to learn, discuss, and practice various wellness strategies. At this event, participants completed pre-tests to self-report their personal self-care status. Throughout the workshop, attendees were able to identify self-care practices that supported their well-being through a self-care inventory. They also had the opportunity to demonstrate some of the skills they learned that day, including breathing exercises, positive affirmations and stress-reduction techniques. Through the identification of relevant practices and the opportunity to apply skills with the support of a wellness expert, each participant consolidated what worked best for them and created a self-care action plan at the conclusion of the workshop. With increased awareness, this self-care action plan was intended to be used by the educators in the upcoming school year; and to determine whether adherence to the plan created any changes in self-care, which would subsequently be predicted to decrease stress and risk for vicarious trauma.

Participants were reconvened in a follow up session in January 2018, following implementation of the self-care practices during the fall semester of the 2017–2018 school year. At this session, the educators completed a post-test to self-report their self-care status following the intervention. There was over a 50-percent loss to follow up for the post-test, with 60 educators returning for the follow-up session. Of these participants, there was a 20-percent increase in “high commitment”

to personal self-care. There was an increase from pre-surveys (31 percent) to post-surveys (62 percent) in new ideas and strategies to use around self-care. Furthermore, outcomes demonstrated an overall increase in understanding the importance of self-care, its impact on work performance and productivity, interactions with students, and morale.³⁶

Being intentional about including self-care as a component of the school responder model can help the adults be healthy both mentally and emotionally, so they can soundly support students.

Common Components that Support Educator Self-Care

The models described above each have differences and similarities in their approach to the well-being of educators. One method utilized a day long training, another consisted of several days of training, along with coaching follow up, and the last example given above provided a shorter version of a training. However, they all included a number of common components.

Common Training Components	Common Training Elements
Improve educator awareness of factors that increase stress	Increasing awareness of the problem
Increase educator understanding of mindfulness	Bringing attention to the issue of the impact the current education system has on the adults working in schools
Create opportunities to practice self-care strategies	Providing professional development to inform on the topics of burnout, STS, and/or vicarious trauma
Support action planning for individualized educator self-care and wellness plans	Offering self-care strategies so educators become familiar with these techniques and can begin to address their own needs
Incorporate follow up activities to improve behavioral outcomes	Creating opportunities for educators to incorporate self-care tips throughout their workday, while also encouraging work/life balance
N/A	Incorporating time for staff interactions, during planning periods, staff meetings, or after school to bolster the sense of team and collegiality
N/A	Assisting teachers and school staff in the development of action planning as a method of commitment and self-accountability

Based on the commonalities of the above-mentioned approaches, each demonstrated improvement in educator self-care, even to a small degree, and each possess components and elements that could be replicated in other communities to support teachers. Teachers need to know they have permission to focus on their own wellness. Without healthy, happy educators available to teach our youth, we fail to fully equip our future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS BASED ON SCIENCE AND PROMISING PRACTICES

- Follow recommendations for general health and wellness, such as getting adequate sleep, exercising regularly, and eating well
- Be mindful of symptoms of vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue and seek support from a professional when necessary
- Take time throughout the day for deep breathing, meditation, positive interactions with supportive peers, or spending time outdoors
- Seek to improve regulation skills for supporting management of stress, well-being, and overall health
- Set boundaries and strive to “leave the work at work,” contributing to work-life balance
- Foster social wellness as a means of self-care by spending time with friends and family, as well as making new connections via social and community groups
- Make use of vacations and days off to take time away from work, which includes taking a mental health day when needed
- Participate in a self-care seminar or retreat designed for educators

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About

The National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice aims to improve life opportunities for youth by advancing policy and practice improvements that ensure the well-being of youth, families, and communities.

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