

## Maintaining Educator Well-Being

*The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.*

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Teaching is one of the most rewarding jobs in the world, but it is one of the most stressful jobs as well. The relationships educators form with their students often keep them in the profession even when they are overwhelmed with job-related pressures and challenges.

Being unaware of your own needs, however, can put you at greater risk of overextending yourself and becoming fatigued from work. Over time, unaddressed stress can negatively affect your relationships with students and your ability to support them. It is therefore critical that you stay attuned to and attend to your well-being because healthy teachers can help students flourish.

### SELF-AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP

Like many teachers new to high-needs schools, Ms. Chase struggled to prioritize her well-being. On top of dealing with personal issues, she was internalizing some of the traumas to which her students were exposed: "Hearing what they came from or went home [to] definitely took a toll on me." Personal and job-related stress began to impact her immune system and mental health. She was frequently sick with migraines, dizzy spells, and colds, and started experiencing depression-like symptoms. Despite this, she continued to take work home every night and on the weekends, which over time, only inflamed the symptoms of stress she was experiencing. Ms. Chase's attitude toward work and health started to improve when she began to acknowledge and address the impacts of stress on her well-being. This shift, however, would not have been possible for Ms. Chase without an understanding of how to maintain well-being and adequate resources to do so.

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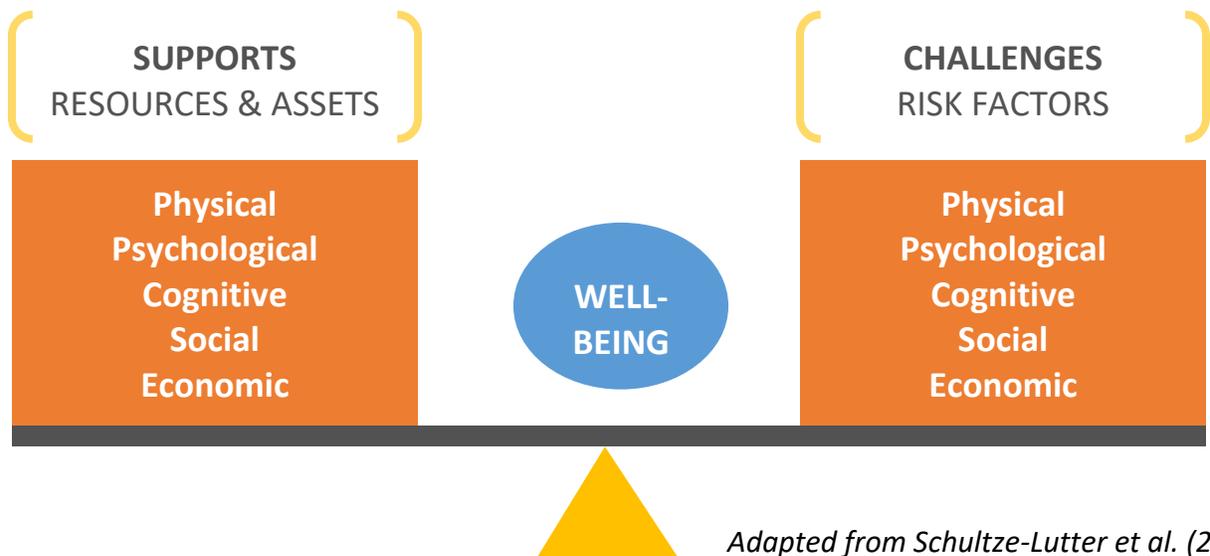
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Health and well-being plays a key role in the longevity of your career, especially if you work closely with students who are exposed to many stressors at home and in their neighborhoods. Taking the time to maintain your health is one of the best things you can do for your students because your well-being is related to your ability to nurture their growth.

**Well-being** can be conceptualized as a balance beam between your resource pool and the challenges that you face. Your well-being remains balanced when you have sufficient resources to meet the challenges or risks that you encounter. Your well-being becomes “out of balance” when your stressors exceed your resources.

Being “out of balance” becomes a concern when the shift is sudden and significant or persists for a long period of time. In these situations, your health may be negatively impacted. Experiencing stress, however, is not always detrimental. In fact, experiencing some adversity is necessary for growth and having adequate resources when challenges arise helps to build resiliency. Those who do not face enough adversity may struggle to adapt when larger life challenges arise.



*Adapted from Schultze-Lutter et al. (2016)*

## FIVE DOMAINS OF WELL-BEING

Being prepared and supported to overcome life’s challenges, including challenges at work, requires adequate attention to each domain of well-being. The five, interrelated domains determine how you navigate your work, family, and home environments, such as how you engage in relationships, cope with challenges, and handle responsibilities. Maintaining a healthy well-being, therefore, requires giving appropriate consideration and resources to all five domains. Some signs of adequate support include:

SIGNS OF HEALTHY WELL-BEING	
<b>PHYSICAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular eating schedule</li> <li>• Healthy, balanced meals</li> <li>• 6-8 hours of sleep</li> <li>• Regular and appropriate physical fitness</li> <li>• Care of body</li> <li>• Use of health care services</li> </ul>
<b>PSYCHOLOGICAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of purpose</li> <li>• Emotional awareness</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Willingness to adapt and belief one can change</li> <li>• Optimistic and strengths-based approach to challenges</li> <li>• Sense of humor</li> <li>• Ask for help when needed</li> <li>• Communicate thoughts and feelings</li> </ul>
<b>COGNITIVE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement in activities that promote intellectual, social, and cultural growth, curiosity, and identity development</li> <li>• Participation in learning communities and hobbies that promote creative expression, bring joy and fulfillment, and create interactions</li> </ul>
<b>SOCIAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form and sustain supportive interpersonal relationships with colleagues, family, friends, partners, and others</li> <li>• Sense of trust</li> <li>• Sense of belonging and connection to others, cultures, community</li> <li>• Surrounding self with positive influences</li> </ul>
<b>FINANCIAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stability and access to basic necessities of life (food, water, shelter)</li> <li>• Control over daily/short-term finances</li> <li>• Capacity to absorb financial shock</li> <li>• Financial freedom to make choices to enjoy life</li> <li>• On track to meet financial goals</li> </ul>

## ENGAGING IN SELF-CARE: PUT YOUR OXYGEN MASK ON FIRST

**Self-care** is an essential component to sustaining not only the emotional aspects of your work as an educator, but also your instructional effectiveness. Self-care is consciously and regularly engaging in stress reduction and health-promoting practices to maintain well-being. For educators who work with students impacted by trauma, self-care is especially critical because it can aid in the buffering of negative effects associated with secondary traumatic stress.

In practice, self-care is taking deliberate actions to prevent and manage experiences of stress, respect your emotional needs, nurture relationships in other areas of your life, and maintain balance between work and personal life. Because your strengths and weaknesses in each domain of well-being is different from the strengths and weaknesses of others, your approach to self-care should be tailored to your specific needs and personality.

Below are some broad guidelines to follow as you engage in self-care.



**Establish healthy boundaries between work & home (leaving work at work, making time for you, etc.)**



**Recognize & accept that you cannot meet all of your students' needs**



**Seek & receive support if needed (instructional coaching, curricular support, social support, etc.)**



**Establish healthy habits (sleep, exercise, diet, leisure, social activities, etc.)**



**Seek and receive professional help if needed (medical attention, therapy, etc.)**

## CAUSES OF JOB-RELATED STRESS

Research consistently points to four major sources of job-related stress for teachers:

### SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Teachers tend to have higher levels of stress in schools without a supportive school culture, collaborative and collegial environment, trust among colleagues, strong principal leadership, and/or a consistent school leader.

### JOB DEMANDS

Meeting the diverse and complex needs of students is a significant source of stress that is often exacerbated by a continuously increasing workload, high-stakes testing, and other “accountability” pressures that may limit teacher autonomy and threaten teachers’ jobs or the vitality of the school.

### SUPPORT & AUTONOMY

Teachers tend to have higher levels of stress in schools without adequate professional support, structured opportunities to meaningfully contribute to school-level decisions, and autonomy over their work.

### PERSONAL RESOURCES & SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

When teachers do not have strong classroom management skills and/or social-emotional competencies, instruction generally suffers, which can be a significant source of stress.

*Adapted from Greenberg et al. (2016)*

Another source of job-related stress may come from working closely with students exposed to trauma. **Secondary traumatic stress (STS)** symptoms stem from learning about the traumatic experiences of students, feeling empathetic toward their situations, and being limited in your ability to change their situations. Experiencing STS over a prolonged period can alter the way you think, feel, and respond to work, home, and social situations.

### What may increase your vulnerability to STS?

Previous traumatic experience

Heightened sense of empathy

Neglect/unawareness of your own social-emotional needs

Pushing too hard to get things done

Trying to do everything on your own

Having a close connection with a student/colleague who experienced trauma

### What are some signs of STS?

Being triggered by a student’s similar traumatic experience

Difficulty concentrating

Low self-esteem

Feeling you can solve all problems

Increased irritability

Isolating oneself from others

Feeling overwhelmed

*Adapted from Hydon et al. (2015)*

## EFFECTS OF STRESS ON EDUCATORS, STUDENTS & SCHOOLS

Experiencing high levels of stress over a long period of time without adequate resources can negatively impact not only your well-being but also the success of your students and school. Students benefit most from having healthy and compassionate teachers. Teacher well-being must therefore be a priority in the fight for educational equity.

POTENTIAL NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON	
TEACHERS	Extended exposure to extreme stress can lead to emotional exhaustion, social detachment, heightened sense of fear, anxiety, feelings of helplessness, estrangement from work, and alteration/disruption of the way you process and respond to information and experiences. It can also contribute to a range of physical and psychological ailments.
STUDENTS	Decreased professional capacity along with increased risk of compassion fatigue and burnout can severely impair the success of students. After all, teachers in these circumstances are less perceptive of and responsive to students' needs.
SCHOOLS	Teacher burnout has severe implications for schools and the broader education system. High teacher turnover contributes to significant declines in student achievement, a substantial loss in investments, and destabilization of schools in highly disadvantaged neighborhoods.

### THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF WORKING WITH TRAUMATIZED STUDENTS

You may work with students who experience physical abuse, neglect, grief, loss, homelessness, parental addiction to drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, community violence and crime. Naturally, you may become worried about their home situations and whether or not their basic needs are being met. Listening to their stories on a daily basis can constrain your capacity as a teacher and impact your functioning in other areas of your life. If this happens, then you may be experiencing STS.

In Ms. Chase's case, working closely with many students exposed to trauma affected her regular functioning: "I would go home so emotionally and physically drained almost every day. Around February, it became difficult to get myself up in the morning and motivated for work. I felt overwhelmed. I was thinking that I was not going to make it through the year and that I would need to take a leave of absence. I remember sitting in the car after school ended one Friday and thinking to myself that I would call my principal to resign then and there."

## CREATING & CARRYING OUT A SELF-CARE PLAN

The path to well-being begins with a **self-care plan**. The resources below will help guide you through the process of developing and implementing a plan that is specific to your needs and challenges. You will start by building awareness of the aspects of your life that are out of balance. You will then identify ways to respond to the areas of your health that need more attention. The next step is to prepare for crisis situations, which are different from experiences of predictable or regular stress. You will then commit to your plan, which includes sharing it with others who can help hold you accountable. Lastly, you will move the plan into action and adjust it based on regular assessment of your successes and challenges.



## MINDFULNESS FOR EDUCATORS

**Mindfulness** is the ability to regulate how you respond to external situations and internal processes. Engaging in mindful practices can help you become more aware of your needs as well as your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and interactions with others. Self-awareness is foundational to maintaining your well-being, and it can help you in the classroom. Teachers who practice mindfulness are less at the mercy of their emotional reactions to challenging student behaviors, which makes them more effective at reducing conflict and developing positive ways of relating in the classroom. This, in turn, contributes to a safe and supportive learning environment for students.

Here are a few **mindfulness practices** you can try:

- 1. Rainbow Walk:** Take a walk and look for something red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Keep going through the colors, in order, until the end of your walk. If you do this in a group, consider discussing what you noticed or felt after the walk.
- 2. Belly Breathing:** We breathe shallowly when we are stressed which makes the body feel as though it's not getting enough air. This causes more stress, which can prompt us to breathe even faster and more shallowly. Regulating your breath is one way to calm your body and breath. Follow the steps in the link to get started.
- 3. Working with Difficult Emotions:** This exercise helps you learn how your emotions function and how to respond consciously, rather than unconsciously, to challenging student behaviors. You may also consider recording your reactions in a journal.
- 4. Centering:** This is an exercise you can do before school or during school before the start of a class to help you bring your attention back to the present moment.
- 5. Guided Meditative Practices:** For an introduction to mindfulness meditation, try these practices at home or at work.

### MINDFUL TEACHING BY THE NUMBERS

It only takes **5** minutes to have a healthy snack. Be sure to stock up on some of your favorites.

There are never more than **24** hours in a day. Don't pretend otherwise. It doesn't help.

**100%** of teachers feel overwhelmed from time to time. So cut yourself some slack, okay?

**3** deep breaths can calm you down. Try it right now. Don't you feel better?

You only need **1** person to start a support group. Is there someone you can ask for help today?

**0:** the number of people who will benefit if you have a nervous breakdown. Taking care of yourself is **NOT** a selfish act.

*Adapted from MindfulTeacher.org*

## MOVING FROM SELF-CARE TO COLLECTIVE CARE

While becoming more attuned to your needs and enacting self-care are critical components to improved well-being, sustaining a healthy orientation toward work is best accomplished with the support of others. Indeed, co-worker social support is a significant protective factor against high levels of stress. Below are some formal and informal ways in which schools or groups of educators can promote collective care (in addition to self-care):

- **Support, develop, and include teachers**

Schools can adjust policies and practices in ways that reduce or prevent stress, increase job satisfaction, and strengthen resiliency among staff. For example, schools can foster a participatory and collaborative work environment, maintain open communication, develop peer and administrative support, encourage professional growth, and meaningfully include teachers in decision-making processes. It is important to acknowledge the needs of new teachers and provide mentors in the same subject, regular opportunities to communicate with and receive support from administrators, appropriate and well-executed professional development, and opportunities for team-building.

- **Create space for healing**

Teachers should also acknowledge their own experiences of trauma and the impact of those experiences. A teacher healing circle is one way to provide space for teachers to recognize their own trauma histories and support each other in the healing process. A healing circle is a safe, teacher-led space in which participants can share their experiences, stories, and wounds. During this process, teachers affirm each other's resilience and voice while also learn about and practice new self-care skills. A possible agenda might include:

1. Meditation
  2. Intention setting
  3. Listening circle or engaging in an expressive art (e.g., journaling to a prompt)
- Closing activity (e.g., song, prayer, reflection and share-out)

- **Implement social-emotional learning pedagogy**

Schools with social-emotional learning (SEL) programs tend to have lower rates of job-related anxiety and depression, higher quality classroom interactions with students, greater teacher engagement, and greater perceived control. These programs typically include training and sustained support in an evidence-based SEL curriculum. Teachers in schools that implement school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) also tend to have lower levels of burnout as well as higher levels of self-efficacy. In the most effective SWPBIS models, teachers receive consistent coaching that helps them improve the quality of interactions with their students.

## MOVING FROM SELF-CARE TO COLLECTIVE CARE (cont.)

- **Health and wellness promotion programs**

Workplace wellness promotion programs can help to improve teacher health as well as save money in the long run. Workplace wellness programs is a system-wide approach to reducing health risks by providing the multiple levels of support for teachers to improve their lifestyles. These programs often include stress management services (e.g., exercise programs), insurance incentives (e.g., lower co-pay and deductibles), and healthy habits campaigns (e.g., nutrition information).

Making teacher well-being and health a fundamental issue in education is an act for equity. Not only can organizations make changes to policies and programs that help reduce or prevent stress, but teachers can also participate in many important ways to help each other maintain and sustain their well-being.

**We encourage you to talk with your colleagues today and make a commitment to work on establishing collective care strategies during the first week after Winter Break, and then institutionalize it as part of your school's culture.**

Please email us at [info@TREPeducator.org](mailto:info@TREPeducator.org) to share your experiences with student engagement and student disengagement and how that affected the way you responded to each, how this has changed over your teaching career, and any advice you want to share.

Please join our virtual learning community@ <http://www.trepeducator.org/forum> to receive weekly ResearchToPractice briefs on the following topics:

- TREP Classroom Management
- De-Escalation
- Social & Emotional Learning
- Educator Self-Care

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