

Healthy Schools Start with Healthy Adults: Strategies to Support Educator Wellness

June 2020

Understanding the Issue

Helping students maintain a sense of safety and connection during the COVID-19 pandemic is shaped by the adults in their lives utilizing their own personal skills and strategies for navigating stressful circumstances. Equipping educators with realistic self-care strategies is essential to student wellness and to the well-being of the overall school community, particularly during a time of isolation due to school closures and social distancing restrictions. Put simply, educators first need to take care of themselves before they can effectively help their students.

The Ripple Effects of Wellness

Individual wellbeing and self-care are central to modeling healthy relationships with students and families. Combined with strategies to maintain a strong school community, this approach forms the foundation for healthy and resilient education systems. These spheres of wellness are interdependent; success in one area depends on success in each of the others (see Figure 1).

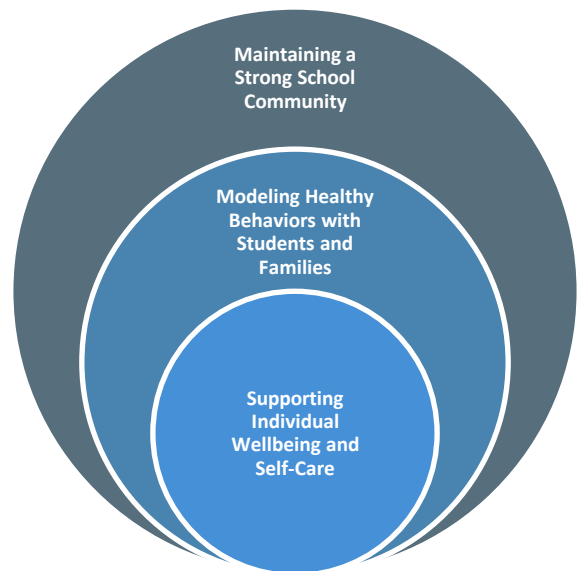


Figure 1. The Ripple Effects of Wellness

Supporting Individual Wellbeing and Self-Care

Unpacking the science of stress, one learns that in prolonged periods of perceived threat, the brain and the nervous system continue to send a signal to both the mind and the body that conveys a lack of safety. This impairs one's best thinking and decision-making abilities. Everyone has unique stress response patterns; different strategies will help different individuals maintain their wellbeing.



- » [This video](#) provides a brief introduction to the body's stress response and provides information on what stress might feel like in your body.
- » Practice stress management techniques, such as a [guided body scan](#) and [alternate nostril breathing](#).
- » Download a mindfulness or meditation app such as [Headspace](#) or [Calm](#) for easy access to just-in-time exercises to promote mental, physical, and emotional wellness.
- » Schedule into your day a planned "brain break" at a set point each day, and make time in your day to move your body to adjust your mindset.

Want some help considering the effects of stress and trauma on your current wellbeing? Check out this [self-assessment](#) for educators, from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.

- » Try out some [chair yoga poses](#) or [simple movements](#) to relieve tension and pain in your neck.
- » Pause to consider what your mindset is and how it might be affecting your experience right now. Reframe your thinking to self-regulate and improve your executive function.
- » Limit your screen time when possible. For every 20 minutes of time spent on a digital device, look into the distance for 20 seconds, to allow your eyes a chance to refocus.

Modeling Healthy Behaviors with Students and Families

The same tools you use for your own self-regulation and stress management are at the heart of modeling resilience and resourcefulness for students.



- » Acknowledge the uncertainty of this time and the unknown factors that students and families experience. Prioritize connection and empowerment and allow flexibility to help you meet people where they are.
- » Increase your compassion for and ability to relate to others' experience. Compassion is linked to [improved mood](#) and other [health benefits](#).
- » Identify a space in your home that is the most conducive to working virtually. Decorate it as you wish, to make it feel more comfortable. Encourage your students to do the same in their homes. Virtual backgrounds can give you more privacy, if you prefer.
- » Do a mood check with your students before diving into instruction. Include social and emotional learning (SEL) [lessons](#) and a variety of SEL [strategies](#) you can adapt to virtual settings.
- » Co-regulate when working with students and their families, using mindfulness strategies. [This resource](#) shares ideas for practicing mindfulness with your students.
- » Allow space for students to identify their emotions and feelings. Validate how they feel, and help them identify ways that they can positively impact their moods and/or normalize their emotional experiences.
- » Create routines that normalize self-awareness within your classroom culture. For example, you might share, "I am feeling frustrated by the interruptions to our group conversation today. I am going to pause and take three breaths so we can reset."
- » Establish boundaries by setting "office hours" during which you will respond to your students' requests, or give yourself a timed response window (e.g., two days) to respond to requests from families.
- » Reevaluate your expectations and baseline for productivity. Getting things done looks and feels different in stressful times. Support students to articulate a new set of goals for themselves.

Maintaining a Strong School Community

Peer support is invaluable to teachers as well as to students.



- » A "buddy system" empowers educators to take care of one another. Pick a "buddy" and set up weekly or biweekly routines as a way to check in with each other. Having authentic relationships with peers in your school community is associated with increased job satisfaction.

- » Model, teach, and review effective problem-solving and other SEL competencies. You can find more strategies to model SEL competencies [here](#).
- » [This educator context and stress spectrum](#), specifically based on common stressors in the COVID-19 pandemic, can help you identify symptoms in yourself and determine what you need from your community. Ask for help as necessary; you are not alone in navigating complex emotions.
- » Educational leaders can use staff development engagements to speak directly to the mental health and wellbeing of the community, such as beginning staff meetings with five minutes of movement, a quick share, or guided relaxation.
- » Educational leaders can also create the opportunity for a weekly virtual school community circle. These circles can be focused on collective wellness and community connection, and can make use of discussion prompts encouraging educators to share a reflection of gratitude or a moment of joy from the past week.

How to Know When to Get Help

Educators may have increased risk of mental health challenges right now, because of their exposure to others' hardship in the current pandemic, compounded with personal challenges which may lead to feelings of overwhelm. If fear or hopelessness is disrupting your daily functioning, or if you suspect that another adult in your community of care/school community needs help, you can use the SAMHSA [confidential national helpline](#) and [behavioral health treatment locator](#), 24/7, 365 days a year, to get help. The Connecticut Commission on Women, Children and Seniors has also compiled [this list of websites and numbers](#) to call for specific services and needs (see page 3). United Way 211 is a multilingual helpline where you can access community services, crisis intervention and referrals to health and human services. Refer parents or caregivers to a hotline for COVID-19-specific children's health needs, the Connecticut Children's Hotline, at 1-833-226-2362, provides 24/7 access.

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