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ONcall

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Treating staff with extra care and kindness

At the risk of stating the obvious: It was a difficult year. Everyone has dealt with stress this year because of the pandemic. Massive stress from personal tragedy to prolonged lower-level stress from changes to routines, work and daily life have affected almost everyone.

At its most extreme, the mental health impact is akin to PTSD, according to crisis experts. Crisis experts have outlined the elements of the preconditions of trauma that are the result of long-term stress. Understanding these effects can help reduce the impact on individuals.

Preconditions for trauma

“According to Bessel van der Kolk, a pre-eminent trauma researcher, there are seven elements of traumatic situations that greatly increase the likelihood of people developing post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. These elements are called “preconditions for trauma.” For many people, during this current crisis, some, if not all, of the following elements, or preconditions, may be present:

- Lack of predictability
- Immobility
- Loss of connection
- Numbing out and spacing out
- Loss of sense of time and sequence
- Loss of safety
- Loss of sense of purpose

There are specific things people can do to eliminate these elements or decrease their impact.” Most of these interventions involve changing our routines or setting up new systems. A schedule, more exercise and greater awareness and intention will help. Read more: <https://builtbycommunity.org/reducing-preconditions-of-trauma/>

Supporting your staff during the crisis

School staff, like many workers, have adapted to rapid changes to working conditions. They are managing new instructional practices with new tools, ongoing concerns about students, responding to worried parents, and massive uncertainty. To state the obvious again: It is stressful. Even worse, it is prolonged stress, which can be physically and emotionally unhealthy.

It is possible to avoid long-term effects — the preconditions of trauma — through awareness and a conscious effort to counter them, similar to strategies for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for students. *For more tips, read [Teacher Interrupted: Leaning into Social-Emotional Learning Amid the Covid-19 Crisis](http://bit.ly/3hD5uyd): <http://bit.ly/3hD5uyd>.*

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(Over)

School leaders should provide essential support for this difficult time. According to professors at the Child Study Center at Yale School of Medicine, “school leadership matters in supporting educator well-being. In one of our studies (currently under peer-review), district support for educator well-being was associated with lower levels of educator burnout and self-judgment during distance learning. Another study found positive correlations between educators’ feelings of emotional safety and school principals’ effective handling of their own emotions in these times of high stress. And yet another study found that leader support of educator well-being was associated with educators feeling appreciated, connected and valued.” <http://bit.ly/3b5EkyA>

Tips for remote staff appreciation

Connecting virtually with staff requires more effort than face-to-face interaction, but it is a valuable way to check in and reassure staff members that they are appreciated.

Schedule time to speak directly to each staff member via a virtual meeting platform.

It will be nice for them to see their leader “in person,” and non-verbal communication is an important part of any conversation. Allow teachers an opportunity to share their frustrations and concerns, and then help them brainstorm solutions.

Support collaboration among staff. Encourage staff to schedule virtual meetings or set up a shared Google doc for comments, concerns and advice.

Include shout-outs at staff meetings. Be sure to celebrate and highlight successes and positive news. It isn’t all bad; make sure to encourage staff to look for the good things as they deal with the challenges of the current reality.

Allow time for sharing fun things. Leave time in staff meetings or schedule a weekly check-in to report on personal hobbies, share photos of family and friends, set up workout challenges or throw a virtual party. Connecting with colleagues allows bonding and builds rapport.

Coping skills for educators

School staff can and should take charge of their own well-being. Learning the skills to manage our own responses is the most effective approach to stress reduction. All of the changes from the pandemic are outside of our control; what we can control, however, is how we respond.

This strategy sounds easy, but it is a learned skill. Yale is offering a 10-hour online course called “Managing Emotions During Stressful and Uncertain Times,” available for free on the online learning platform Coursera: <http://bit.ly/3b5EkyA>.

The course was developed for Connecticut educators in collaboration with state leaders, union officials and education organizations, and it has a 99% positive rating from participants. The SEL emphasis has an added benefit of helping educators expand their understanding of how to manage emotions, which could inform their instructional content and delivery as well.

Emotions matter

In the unlikely event that your staff members seem unaffected by stress, school leaders still have an obligation to care about their emotional health. Stress, anxiety and burnout were already on the rise before this crisis. School administrators with well-developed emotional skills are a protective factor for teachers’ emotional health. The Coursera class is for school leaders, too.

The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence outlines five reasons educators' emotions are directly related to their instructional effectiveness:

Emotions matter for attention, memory, and learning. Positive emotions promote greater engagement. Negative emotions, especially when prolonged, disrupt concentration and interfere with thinking. Chronic stress can result in the release of stress hormones like cortisol, which impacts brain functioning and memory, diminishing our ability to be effective educators and undermining student learning.

Emotions matter for decision making. When we're overwhelmed, scared and stressed, good decision-making is impacted. Pleasant emotions can enhance mental flexibility and creativity and adaptability.

Emotions matter for relationships. Our feelings are conveyed in our expressions and demeanor, which can allow us to connect with or alienate others. Our students and their parents can read these signals in facial expressions, body language and vocal tone, which could contribute to a negative learning experience. Positive signals are especially important for successful distance learning.

Emotions matter for health and well-being. Our emotions are tied to physical and mental health. Negative emotions can result in higher levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, which can cause weight gain and depression. Positive emotional responses may be tied to protective health benefits.

Emotions matter for performance. Chronic stress affects motivation and engagement, leading to burnout, which affects relationships with students, job performance and retention. Burnout can have a tremendous impact on student achievement and the school environment.
<http://bit.ly/3hEVRIP>

Resources

Pre-conditions for Trauma during Covid Pandemic

<https://ruthmccconnell.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Grief-and-Covid-19.pdf>

Reducing Preconditions of Trauma during Covid-19

<https://builtbycommunity.org/reducing-preconditions-of-trauma/>

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