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Other Ways to Foster Mental Health

Probably we could write an entire book just on the topic of taking care of ourselves as teachers. Not only do we need to be at our personal bests for ourselves, but we are also role models for young people and often an inspiration to folks we don't even know about. Everyone knows the basics—eat right, get plenty of rest, exercise, and drink enough water. We have just a few more we would like you to consider because we think you are worth it. For a summary of how to deal with stress, see Appendix 5.1.

1. **Make sure you have a “go-to” person.** In Chapter 7, we discuss the importance of building relationships with colleagues. Hopefully there is someone at your school who is your *safety net*, someone who will stand by you no matter what. If you don't have that person at your school, try to cultivate a friendship with someone within at least an hour's drive from you who would come and help you no matter the time of day or night you called. How do you find somebody like that? As your mother always told you, “The best way to have that kind of friend is to be that kind of friend.”

Definition of a Friend

A real friend will come and help you if you call no matter what the time of day or night.

A better friend will come and help you move.

A “go-to” friend will come and help you move bodies—no questions asked.

2. **Try to relax during some part of each day.** We are not recommending that you have Sven, the masseuse, pop in to give you a back massage during your unruly sixth-hour class or that you put on sunglasses, prop your feet on a table, and sing along with the Beach Boys' “Kokomo” playing on your iPod during a faculty meeting, but we do think it's imperative at least one time a day that educators find some way to break the tension of the rigorous work we do. Whether it is closing and locking your door, hiding out in the bookstacks in the media center, or even just sitting in your car in the parking lot, it is important to find some alone time to decompress and breathe, especially since teachers are almost never alone (“Yes, Tiffany René, I'll look over your report in just a minute—now please close my bathroom stall door and wait for me in the hall.”). You can also read something inspirational, listen to soothing music, write in your journal, or just sit quietly and gather your thoughts.

Sacrificing your personal life to the classroom may seem like a sign of dedication, but is more likely to lead to burnout and bad attitude. We all need time to go home, turn the teaching dial down, and go back to being a person with a first name.

—Roxanna Elden, author of
See Me After Class (as cited in Ferlazzo, 2013)

- 3. Learn how and when to say “no.”** We can’t control everything that’s going to happen, but we can control how we strengthen ourselves to handle the unknown. How many of you educators are presently thinking, “I just don’t have quite enough things to do in my life. I’m a little bored. How can I get my superiors to add one or two more things to my plate?” That would be—no one! As a matter of fact, we believe that it should be a rule that no one can add another task to a teacher’s assignments without removing something equally time consuming. One way to curb the temptation to multitask is to reduce the load we already have—or at least not add anything else.

Given that our time is already over committed and we are stretched as thin as we can stretch, many of us still lack the ability to say “no” when asked to handle even more responsibilities. Maybe because we see ourselves as helpers and caregivers, we feel compelled to step up and chair the math-a-thon, edit the student newsletter, sponsor the pep squad, donate a tutoring session, and dozens of other worthy causes that present themselves each year. Many times, we do it because it seems that no one else will do it and we can’t live with the guilt of not volunteering.

We (the authors) are all for volunteering. We think being willing to help others is part of our noble profession, and individuals ought to give their time, talent, and material assets to others when they choose to. The problem comes when we commit to more things than we can effectively do. It is so easy to say, “Yes, I’ll help with that,” when the task is six months away (Always remember: Dates are closer than they appear on the calendar!). Then when the time is upon us, we lament, “Oh, I can’t believe I let them talk me into doing this. I don’t even have time to dust my plant leaves, let alone take care of this chore!” Seriously, we think teachers should carefully select the causes they most want to support and leave the rest to others. When we over-commit, we become “non-joyful givers,” and that defeats the whole purpose of giving, right? It also adds to our stress levels.

Have you ever noticed that no matter what the request made of faculty members, there are always one or two who never get pressured into volunteering nor seem to feel guilty about not stepping up? Do you secretly envy their ability to say “no” and get away

with it? Do you sometimes wish you could be a little more assertive about not getting roped into things you wish you had not agreed to do? Perhaps it is time you learned the secret to avoiding being manipulated into over-committing.

First, stop volunteering for things you cannot do, do not wish to do, or do not have the time or energy for. If you are asked directly to take on another responsibility, you need to think about your personal well-being and the effect the added responsibility will take on your time and stress level. The art of saying “no” to a colleague or to an administrator begins with a little assertiveness training. You do not need to be aggressive, hostile, or rude, but you do need to mean what you say. Don’t whine, hedge, or offer an apology.

Scenario: In a faculty meeting, the administrator is trying to enlist volunteers for a special project. He spies you and beguilingly pleads, “Theresa, I really need a sponsor for this year’s Help-A-Child Foundation, and you are such a terrific organizer, I’d like to enlist your help. As you know, this event is an important part of our community’s outreach to needy children, and of course, being a parent yourself, I know you’ll want to contribute. Just look at these pictures I have of young children with sad little smudged faces. Doesn’t it just break your heart? May I count on you to take over this year’s fundraiser?”

Normal responses are, “I’d like to help, but I don’t have time.” “Oh gee, I can’t do it at this time.” “Well, I’d like to help but. . . .” None of these are what an assertive person says because they leave you open for arguments and more appeals. Don’t allow any discussion on the issue, and don’t say, “I can’t do it this time” because it sounds like you are volunteering for next year. In her workshops on teacher time management, Debbie Silver suggests that individuals give a three-point response.

Three-Point Response

In a calm but firm voice you say the following:

1. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.” (In other words, stop blowing smoke up my dress; you’re not going to flatter me into this.)
2. “I think the Help-a-Child Foundation is a worthy cause, and I hope this year’s event is a tremendous success.” (So quit showing me pictures of sad little kids, trying to manipulate me with sob stories, or otherwise selling me on the cause. I’m sure it’s a great cause, but that’s not the point.)

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3. "For several reasons, I have to say, 'No.'" (Then break eye contact—he who blinks, loses. Do not hedge, mumble, or whine. Clearly and succinctly turn down the offer, and shift your attention to other things—or better yet, walk away. Assertive people state their cases simply and quietly and offer no explanation or apology.)

Most importantly, don't feel guilty or responsible. By not volunteering for everything that comes your way, you can often nudge others into roles they may need to try. You also save your time and attention for causes that are personally gratifying to you and, therefore, cause you less stress. Being a *non-joyful giver* does not help you or the cause in the long run. Say "no" and mean it.

Practice the three-point response until you can do it without an apologetic voice, any additional explanation or lingering guilt. Your time is one of your most precious commodities. Take control of it and invest it carefully.

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4. **Pay attention to your life outside your job.** It seems simplistic to state that in order to take care of others, educators must first take care of themselves, but many in our field make truly unhealthy choices in our own lives as we skip meals, forego sleep, work incredibly long hours nightly and on weekends, and generally put every ounce of energy we have into our jobs. There need to be a balance. Maybe it's time to stop wearing teacher overtime as a badge of honor. Maybe part of our burn-out problem comes from the belief that overwork is the mark of a good teacher.

A former state teacher of the year tells us that she was relentless in doing her job as a teacher. She committed to working for her students day and night and was very proud of how she was able to rear her own three sons and still do all the extras it took to be an outstanding educator. Years later when having a discussion with her grown-up sons, she told them she was surprised they were not more altruistic. Her oldest son replied, "Gee, Mom, I wonder why we're not." Seeing the confusion in her face, he continued, "Mom, did it ever occur to you that sometimes we just needed you to be *our* mom? Everywhere we went with you your students would hug you and tell you they wished you were their mom, or they'd want to sit with us, or they'd interrupt us so they could talk to you. At night when we wanted to tell you stuff, you were on the phone talking to your students' parents or grading papers or preparing things for your class the next day. You were a great teacher, but sometimes we needed you to be just our mom."

The increased amount of work that has come with the pandemic and its aftermath has many teachers struggling harder than ever to maintain the balance between school and work. Katy Farber believes that teachers' hypervigilance and stress fatigue can have negative impacts on our families:

Teachers have dealt with every scenario at school—physically, emotionally, intellectually. That's why our loved ones sometimes see an empty stare at the end of the day. We teachers have used up all our energy for decisions, protection, care, safety, emotions at school. There is nothing left at the end of the day. No tolerance for big toddler tantrums, long conversations, negotiations with tweens and teenagers, making plans and logistics. We are often unable to respond to the needs of our families with active, compassionate listening, decision-making, or planning. (Farber, 2022)

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