

Ask an Expert – Back to School Self-Care for Educators

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused stress and challenges for people across the world. As the new school year begins, emotions can run from excitement to fear and from relief to stress. Perhaps no one feels the pressure of new challenges and routines during the pandemic quite as much as educators.

Educators care deeply about their students. That is why they do what they do. However, part of that caring opens them up to experience some of the trauma their students bring to school each day, including poverty, grief, family issues, illness and now, COVID-19. In addition, educators may have fear and anxiety due to the procedures they are asked to follow to keep themselves and their students safe. This can lead to symptoms similar to those of their trauma-affected students such as depression, chronic fatigue, anxiety and withdrawal. When this occurs, it is often referred to as secondary traumatic stress (STS) or compassion fatigue. STS is not just a case of an educator having a bad day. It is something that impairs daily life, causes significant distress, and it can happen to anyone. It is important to know there are ways to work through STS/compassion fatigue. Here are four tips.

1. Be kind to yourself. Take care of your basic wellness needs, including physical, social, mental health, emotional and spiritual health.

* Take care of your physical health. Exercise regularly, get adequate sleep, eat balanced meals, monitor your health and visit your doctor and dentist when needed.

* Cultivate and maintain close friendships. Make time to connect with friends and loved ones.

* Keep your mind sharp. Do crossword puzzles, read books or research something that interests you.

* Talk to someone close to you to help you work through problems. Talk to a doctor or therapist if you feel overly depressed or anxious. Keep a journal and write about your feelings.

* Take time to relax. Take a bath or spend time doing a hobby you enjoy.

* Nurture your spiritual needs by doing things that are meaningful to you and help you feel connected.

2. Practice mindfulness. This is one of the most successful strategies for overcoming the effects of STS or compassion fatigue. Mindfulness can help you increase emotional regulation and strengthen the ability to deal with emotional challenges. For suggestions, visit [Getting Started with Mindfulness](#).

3. Change the negative to positive. Learning to think optimistically has shown to benefit physical and emotional health. Known as cognitive restructuring or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), it can be done at home and works well when combined with mindfulness. For CBT techniques, visit [Cognitive Restructuring](#).

4. Create an action plan for self-care. Self-care is often neglected as other things take precedence.

* Keep it simple and go slowly, adding new goals once they become routine.

* Set goals you know you can sustain. This is not a time for making drastic life changes.

A new school year can bring a host of stressful challenges for both students and educators on any given year. But with the pandemic this year, there will likely be increased experiences with stress and compassion fatigue or STS. Educators can protect their own basic wellness needs and still be available for their students' needs by learning to practice self-care. See below for additional resources.

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Additional Resources:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Secondary Traumatic Stress](#)

Administration for Children & Families: [Secondary Traumatic Stress](#)

Psychology Today: [Are You Suffering from Compassion Fatigue?](#)

Sources:

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