

# TEACHERS: PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

According to several studies and reports, teaching is one of the most stressful jobs in the country. The American Federation of Teachers' 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey found that 61 percent of teachers said their jobs were always or often stressful—more than double the rate of non-teaching working adults—and 58 percent said they had poor mental health due to stress levels.<sup>1</sup> That was before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and since then, the transition to online learning, debates over reopening, and individual safety concerns are making teachers' mental health worse.<sup>2</sup>

If you're feeling tired and disengaged, there's a good chance it's related to trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and/or "battle fatigue." Teachers are often focused on taking care of and supporting others, but without prioritizing your wellbeing, those stress levels won't lift. Your mental health isn't only important to you—teacher wellness is also linked to stability in schools and student achievement.<sup>3</sup>

## WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF

**SET BOUNDARIES EARLY ON—AND HOLD THEM.** Expressing your needs is necessary. Whether your school has gone virtual or not, you may be in more constant contact with parents that you're used to. You can't be on-the-clock at all times, so set office hours for remote teaching—even for young kids. A 2-hour block a few times a week lets students (and parents) know when they can reach you immediately and allows you to protect your free time. Schedule time to respond to other requests or let students' families know that you're unavailable after 5pm and will return any emails or calls the following day. If your school goes virtual, give yourself a dedicated workspace at home to signal to both yourself and others that you're in work mode.

**FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL.** COVID-19 has taken a lot of certainty away from everyone—controlling what you're able to will help give you back structure and a sense of security that you've likely been craving. You're in charge of how you spend your free time, your priorities, and your mindset. Check in with yourself: Are your news sources trustworthy? Do you need a break from media exposure? What can you do to boost your own sense of safety? Get involved in policy decisions in your district, attend school board meetings, and participate in your union to voice your opinions on school plans.

**MOVE YOUR BODY.** Teachers are often on their feet all day and spend a lot of time moving around the classroom. It may not seem like much, but you're actually releasing a lot of energy through that constant movement. If your school has gone virtual, you may be sitting a lot more. Set a timer to remind yourself to get up, even if it's just for a 30-second stretch or walk around your house or apartment. If you want more consistent movement, think about using a yoga ball for a chair, get a standing desk, or buy a mini exercise bike for under your desk.

**STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY.** Social connection is crucial during times of hardship, so lean on your support network. You aren't the only one trying to adjust. Feeling isolated or unsupported can make things worse. Reach out to that colleague who seems to "get" you, the person who always makes you laugh, or someone else who you can count on to validate your feelings. A short conversation can go a long way in helping you feel less alone.

**KEEP UP WITH THE SELF-CARE.** One of the best ways to ensure mental wellness is by having a strong foundation. Make sure you get at least 7 hours of sleep, eat a nutritious diet, spend time outside, and exercise regularly. Don't forget to work in some other self-care activities like journaling or meditation—write it into your schedule so you don't make excuses! Self-care can be hard to do in between creating lesson plans, teaching, communicating with parents and taking care of other responsibilities like cooking and cleaning, but it's important.

**MAINTAIN REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS.** Life isn't "business as usual" right now, no matter how much you may want it to be. Work on shifting your expectations—don't frame current experiences as "terrible," look at them as "different." Give yourself time and space to adjust to your new normal instead of pressuring yourself to act how you did before COVID-19. Be patient with others—some of your students have probably been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and have their minds on things other than school. And set small, realistic goals for yourself, especially with distance learning. Remember that you don't have control over your students' environment, background noise, workspace, or parental support. But you can still help make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed, by giving students access to you and the necessary materials.

