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TENDING TO YOUR BASIC NEEDS

So much of the narrative about what it means to be a teacher involves “doing without,” or being a martyr. Pushing aside basic self-care—things like getting enough sleep, drinking enough water, actually using your sick days when you don’t feel well, and using the bathroom when you need to use the bathroom—may seem noble, but think: Who benefits from your lack of basic self-care? Not you. And definitely not the kids, who are left to deal with a teacher who decided to teach through the flu, hold their bladder until the end of the day, or allow themselves only four hours of sleep on school nights. Your basic self-care is as essential to your teaching as professional development: Both you and your students suffer and pay the price when you don’t get it. (Oh, and your loved ones, too. I can promise you that they aren’t fans of when you neglect your basic self-care, either.)

In my discussions with teachers and administrators from across the country, I have met many veteran education professionals who have become so

accustomed to putting others' needs first that they've neglected their own self-care to the point of making themselves chronically ill. I've also seen many new teachers working at unsustainable levels as they make the transition from being a student to being a teacher, pushing ahead even when they are exhausted. Now, as I write these words in late 2021, our nation is seeing what happens when educators who are already straining to do all that they can for others are also forced to work through a pandemic in, at best, questionable safety.

Simply applying more energy and more time to our jobs does not fix problems that are systemic in nature. Attempting to power through situations that are beyond our control puts us in danger and, ultimately, allows the systems that have put us into this position to continue to function. Trying to keep up with unsustainable demands leaves us exhausted, frustrated, and, often, questioning whether we should stay in the field. We're also doing a disservice to our students when we don't take care of our basic needs: Studies have shown that when high job demands and stress are combined with low social-emotional competence and classroom-management skills, poor teacher performance and attrition increase. Indeed, "understanding and uncovering negative emotions related to external stressors is the first step towards a better performance, a higher degree of professional satisfaction, and consequently, a higher level of teacher retention (Montgomery and Rupp, 2005, p. 483). In a study of New York City fourth- and fifth-grade students, higher teacher turnover had a significant negative effect on both math and language arts achievement; turnover was particularly harmful to lower-performing students (Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2013).

There's more to self-care than what we typically see on social media. Self-soothing practices like bubble baths can be fun and might help you clear your mind for a few minutes, but they don't address the issues that made you retreat to the tub in the first place. So, rather than list off a series of tips, this chapter will suggest ways in which you can be aware of your own basic needs and make changes to meet them in the moment. Think about it this way: Just as we might say to students who aren't demonstrating their fullest potential, "I care about you too much to not speak up. I care about you too much to deem this as acceptable behavior," we can say the same to ourselves regarding our own self-care and wellness. We can say: "I love this profession and my purpose too much to continue pouring from an empty cup because I know that is not sustainable in the long run." This is an opportunity to disconnect and detach from the martyrdom myth in order to show up as

your fullest self tomorrow. Admittedly, this isn't always easy or comfortable: Schools are not designed for teachers' or administrators' well-being, and many of us carry the weight of trauma. No matter what you bring with you to work each day, know that you are not alone.

DISCOVER WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

I can hear a lot of secondary teachers saying "Oh my gosh, what is this?" when it comes to approaching well-being professional development that focuses on self-care.

—Rachel, former Social Studies Teacher and Supervisor, Maryland

The more I am learning and experiencing, the more I see that mindfulness is a practice that is good for me and my life right now. Other people might become more mindful and aware of who they are in different ways, so I don't think that it should be prescribed.

—Middle School Language Arts Teacher, Colorado

While this book can list a number of self-care options, you are the expert in *you*. Where do you notice that nurturing, "coming-home" type of experience, the one that feels like your bucket is being filled?

Instead of tuning into ourselves and our own individual experiences, often-times we're directed by someone else's ideas of what self-care *should* look like. In fact, recent studies show that the internet is the first stop when it comes to searching for self-care strategies (Rennis, McNamara, Seidel, and Shneyderman, 2014). But only *your* body can tell you what *you* need. Our bodies send us cues for us to listen to, but we have to be the ones not only to listen (before it gets too loud) but also to act on these cues in supportive ways that are just as unique as we are. This is especially important to note because not everyone has our best interests at heart: Self-care is now a \$10 billion industry that continues to expand in the United States and around the world with the sole focus of commodifying self-care (Myers, 2014).

Define your own unique version of self-care.

Choose practices and behaviors that help you to feel competent, creative, awake, and full of life. If it works, keep trying it. If it doesn't work, ditch it. There is no body of research to support a single, quick-fix solution. It's up to you to discover what works best for you.

PRACTICE SELF-CARE COMPETENCE

My self-care has been omission. Places, spaces, and people.

—Anleeta, Elementary School Special Educator, Chicago Public Schools, Illinois



VIDEO CLIP 1.1

Anleeta discusses how her experiences as an educator have shown how self-care is a culmination of one's physical and mental health.

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Often, when we think of self-care, we think of things to add to our lives: mindfulness, yoga, a walk outside, time for ourselves. However, self-care can also mean removing harmful or negative influences from your life. It can mean ending relationships with individuals who don't support you and your best interests. It can mean not engaging in an argument with

*Consider which elements
are weighing on you.*

someone who is not committed to understanding you. It may mean removing yourself from abusive situations, people, friendships, or work environments. Delete the negative

influences in your life to support your personal well-being and actively practice your own social-emotional competence in doing so. A teacher's own social-emotional competencies and well-being are key factors influencing student and classroom outcomes (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Sometimes saying "yes" to the committee, extra event, or additional activity outside of your job description is doing a disservice to your students if you are putting that commitment above your own social-emotional well-being.

Is there something holding you down that isn't necessary anymore? Maybe it's time to take it out of your backpack and let it go. Do you need to lead multiple committees? Do you need to have a Pinterest-perfect bulletin board that changes every week? Do you need to be available to parents or colleagues after 9:00 p.m.? Once you've established boundaries, people tend to respect them.

MAINTAIN YOUR SELF-CARE

Self-care is never one and done; it's continual.

—High School Teacher, New York

Running on the treadmill has its benefits, but consider the difference between a one-time run and ongoing cardio. Or consider how one session of therapy may be helpful, but what is truly worthwhile is the long-term investment in yourself. We live in a quick-fix world, but self-care isn't about "fixing" anything. Rather, it's an opportunity to nurture yourself as you already are. Consider it like maintenance for your car. If you own a car you have to make sure to regularly add gas, change the oil, check the brakes, and so on. Not just when there's an emergency, but as a continual practice.

According to research, more frequent participation in self-care activities relates to enhanced well-being (Richards, Campenni, and Muse-Burke, 2010), and previous research has found direct effects of self-care on self-awareness and well-being (Coster and Schwebel, 1997).

Self-care frequency data in a high-stress job like teaching is not easy to come by, but a recent study shows that US medical students who engage in self-care report less stress and a higher quality of life. Their findings suggest that US medical students who report high engagement in a wide array of self-care activities may experience some protection from the negative relationship between stress and quality of life (Ayala et al., 2018). For caregivers, self-care is essential.

Treat self-care like you treat your cell phone.

Do you take care of recharging your phone more than you recharge your own self-care? How do you recharge? And are you doing it more or less often than you're recharging your digital devices? Don't wait until the last minute to recharge yourself, or until things start glitching or going haywire. Plug into self-care even when your battery is already 99% charged.

*Personal
Growth*



LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

I had repeated UTIs. . . My physician said to me, "It's a nurses and teacher profession disease: They don't take bathroom breaks."

—Elementary Teacher, New York

I remember lying in the hospital bed and I thought, "I'll finally get to rest."

—High School Biology Teacher, North Carolina

Many educators are empaths, tuned into the physical and social-emotional needs of others, often before themselves. While this level of attunement isn't something we should shame or eradicate, I propose that we also integrate a practice called body awareness, defined as "an attentional focus on and awareness of internal body sensations" (Mehling et al., 2009, introduction).

*Pay attention to the signals
your body is sending you.*

Evidence suggests that an ability to recognize subtle body cues promotes overall health (Baas et al., 2004), yet our jobs often train us to ignore these cues.

Signals from your body may be quiet or they may be loud. Listening to your body means eating well, going to the doctor when you need to, and actually using your personal and sick days. It also means getting enough sleep.

Studies of teachers' response to high job strain reveal that they spend more time than most people ruminating about work-related issues and their brains take longer to unwind. Sleep hours suffer, as well as sleep quality. We need sleep to think clearly, react quickly, and create memories. It is during the later hours of sleep (especially between the sixth and eighth hour) when the brain releases the neurochemicals that stimulate the growth of the memory connections. (Willis, 2014)

The average teacher is reported to sleep six hours a night, falling short of the most valuable sleep time (Cropley, Dijk, and Stanley, 2006).

These might not sound like exciting solutions, but they work. By contrast, pushing yourself to work longer hours is not a badge of honor. You might think you'll gain valuable time from getting less sleep, but you won't be doing yourself or your students any good if your thinking, reaction time, and memory are impeded.



Figure 1.1

PRESENT YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

I went into my first year of teaching with a weight. I was a victim of police brutality. . . . For a while, I dealt with a lot of anxiety [by] putting on a face for my students. . . . It felt like it took double energy to be present and be okay as their leader in the classroom.

—Elementary School Teacher, Louisiana

Teaching is a profession that often implies that we must be okay all the time, whether we're simply having a discouraging day or we're dealing with more serious issues. But our traumas and the invisible weights we carry in our body have an impact, not only on our health and well-being but also on our students' well-being and academic success. According to a longitudinal study, elementary school teachers who have greater stress and show more symptoms of depression create classroom environments that are less conducive to learning, which leads to poor academic performance among students. Students who began the school year with weaker math skills and had a teacher with more depressive symptoms had the lowest rate of achievement (McLean and Connor, 2015).

Don't assume that you can't bring your authentic self to your job. There is nothing wrong with answering a peer's "How are you?" with

Be authentic.

"Not so great today, but thanks for asking." Or with sharing with students that you've had a loss that has made you sad. Being authentic is an

opportunity to bring your own humanity into the classroom. It takes far more energy to fake okay-ness than to be real. Additionally, pretending to be fine rarely results in authentic connections to your students or colleagues.

SHOW UP FOR YOURSELF

There is no better feeling than when a child has that "Aha!" moment. However, in order to achieve that "Aha!" moment, teachers like myself often stay up late, neglect exercise, get into work early and survive on coffee that has turned cold. When you care for 20–30 bodies for eight hours a day,

your mind starts to wonder how you can possibly care for one more person—even if it's yourself.

—Molly, Elementary Teacher and Teacher Coach of English for Students of Other Languages (ESOL), Maryland



VIDEO CLIP 1.2

Molly shares what keeps her going in the classroom—and the necessity of ensuring she has time for herself.

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You can probably remember a time when you or a colleague kept food or even a change of clothes on hand for students, when you went to a school event to support a student, or when you followed up with family members when a student was in crisis. Consider how empowering it would feel to show up in an above-and-beyond capacity for yourself. Relentlessly. With the same passion and fervor that you show for others.

Research has shown that being kind to ourselves and practicing self-compassion improves our well-being. It also benefits the people around us. Researchers Kristin Neff and Andrew Costigan (2014) have argued that having a kind attitude toward ourselves actually makes us better able to look at our mistakes and make real changes.

*Spend five minutes
practicing active self-
compassion.*

As we practice staying in tune with ourselves and our basic needs, we become better able to ground ourselves in our own self-identity, understanding who we are and what we need without judging ourselves. Thus, we are better able to approach our students and loved ones from a place of nonjudgment and compassion. If you need to take five minutes to sit quietly before you join a faculty meeting, take it. Take a break from grading papers or sending emails to get something real to eat, not just a handful of snacks from the vending machine. Recognize those moments when you need to prioritize your own well-being and basic needs. Show up for yourself the way you show up for students.

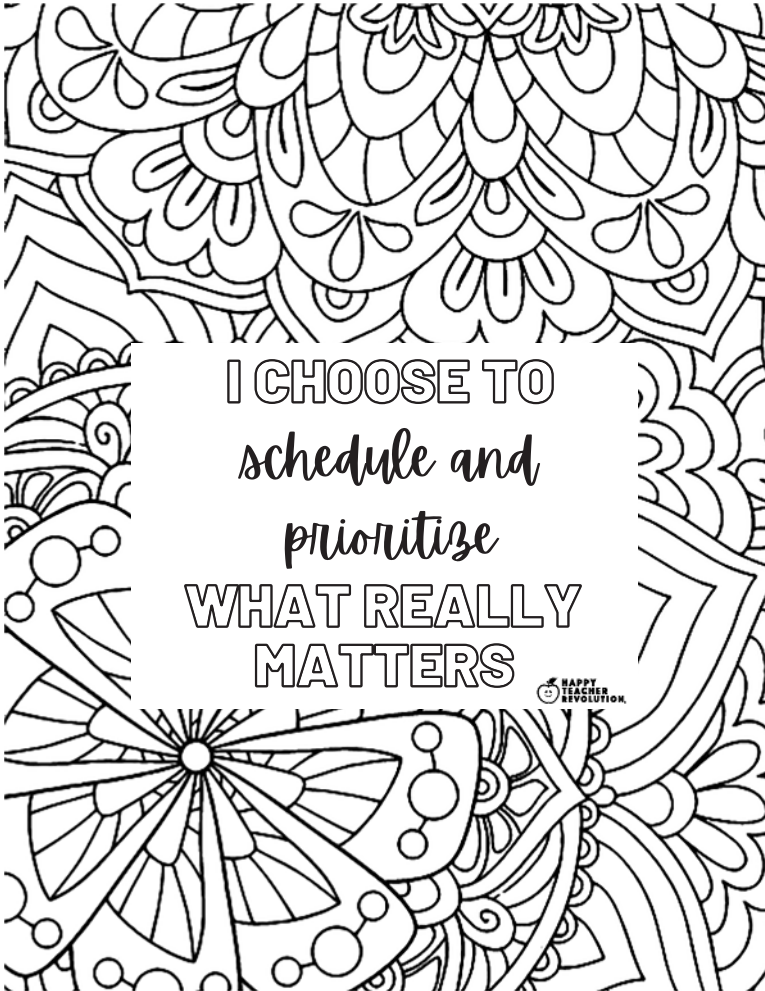


Figure 1.2



VIDEO CLIP 1.3

Morgan explains how a security breach put her and her students in danger and how she was left without support in the aftermath of the event.

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CENTER YOUR WELL-BEING

The day a 25-year-old came into my classroom to try to fight one of my students or when a student stabbed my hand. . . . It would have been helpful to have time with a counselor to do deep breathing. But I had to keep teaching.

—Morgan, founder, The Greener Grass Project;
former Middle School Educator, Maryland

[For] a lot of my friends who struggle with mental health, what is offered are more Band-Aid approaches. [They] do not feel supported in terms of the intensity of what is being offered. Also, there's an intensity of the emotions that we feel as teachers.

—High School Teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL), Tennessee

I want to advocate for my physical safety in terms of not getting COVID. I think a lot of it for me is that I don't know all of my rights so to speak. I think teacher training programs do a really poor job of making sure teachers know their rights. . . . What can I legally do or refuse to do in order to advocate for myself and my colleagues?

—Aubree, Fourth- to Fifth-Grade Teacher, Michigan

Often, organizations that put people in stressful situations (e.g., the military) have systems and infrastructure set up to support their personnel. Unfortunately, schools typically do not.

As of the writing of this book, COVID-19 and gun violence are some of the most publicized health threats in schools. However, there are also less-publicized health issues in schools: asbestos, lice, rodents, contagious diseases (schools rank among the “germiest” workplaces), trauma, and stress. Additionally, teachers are more likely to report being stressed at work than people in other professions, and tons of research suggests that stress can weaken

the immune system (Will, 2020). Perhaps these factors are why teachers are more susceptible to certain types of infections than other workers (Kovess-Masféty, Sevilla-Dedieu, Rios-Seidel, Nerrière, and Chee, 2006).

An educator who feels unsafe, uncared for, and devalued cannot give their full selves to their work. Basic human needs extend to those who teach as much as they do to those who are to be taught.

— Christopher Emdin, Professor of Education,
University of Southern California

Autonomy



Sometimes we may need to acknowledge that the education system we are working within was not designed with our well-being as caregivers in mind. Doing so starts your autonomy in acknowledging that you are your own first advocate. Consider the following suggestions when it comes to prioritizing your own well-being regarding personal sovereignty.

- *Learn where to go for help.*

Know your rights and the support available to you so that you are ready when a serious issue strikes. Knowing the details of your contract, having specific contacts in Human Resources, knowing what your benefits plan offers (including leave time policies), and learning about Employee Assistance Programs will help you to advocate for your own health if you should need to. Know your union organization or a building representative that you are able to contact with concerns about safety.

- *Ask for help.*

People who are in distress often reflexively respond that they are okay, even when they are not. Don't expect that others will be able to see past this common response if you need help. If your first attempt doesn't get the response you need, try someone else, moving up the chain of command in your building. Keep at it until you get your needs addressed. This might even mean speaking up beyond school—in the community, on social media, or even talking with media outlets if the situation warrants it. Your voice has power. When we reach out for help when we

need it, we are doing the very same thing that we ask our students to do each day. We are practicing what we teach.

- *Leave if you have to.*

As I write this portion of the book, COVID-19 is surging in the United States. After hearing more stories than I can count about teachers being required to teach in unsafe environments, there's one more suggestion I feel compelled to make here: Get out if you need to. This isn't a suggestion I make lightly; the strength of our schools relies on having skilled and experienced teachers and administrators, and each time one of us leaves the field, we are taking our hard-won experience with us. However, we cannot be the teachers or role models we want to be for students if we lose our health.

*Environmental
Mastery*



