

WHY TEACHERS NEED TO CARE ABOUT SELF-CARE

By Patrice Palmer

“Self-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel”. Eleanor Brown

Teaching is a profession that requires giving of one’s self to make a difference for students. The chronic use of empathy and depletion of emotional resources are strongly associated with emotional exhaustion and/or professional burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Also, challenges such as student behaviour, precarious work, multiple workloads or administrative responsibilities can add to the pressures of this demanding profession.

There is a growing interest in the area of student well-being but everyone must flourish, including students, teachers, and administrative staff. Research studies suggest that learning happens best when teachers and their students are well but the added benefit is that as teachers flourish, relationships with students, colleagues and the larger community become more positive (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). Therefore, the learning and working environment is sustaining for all when teachers increase their well-being and flourish through self-care practices.

Self-care is not an indulgence but the key to sustaining the joys and rewards of one’s teaching practice. Self-care is defined as skills and strategies used to maintain personal, familial, emotional, and spiritual needs while attending to the needs and demands of others (Newell & MacNeil, 2016). In addition, Reading (2017) suggests that it is “a life-giving activity that restores, sustains and improves your health, and re-fuels your tank” (p. 13). Initially self-care was thought to be the sole responsibility of teachers, but as Cherkowski and Walker (2018) argue, it is a personal, interpersonal and organizational responsibility. Without self-care, teachers are at risk of emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue and professional burn-out.

Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) provide definitions for key terminology related to their theory of Hemorrhaging of The Caring Self:

- **EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION:** the state of being depleted by the chronic needs, demands, and expectations of students and organizations
- **DEPERSONALIZATION:** negative, cynical, or detached responses (an “I don’t care” attitude)
- **SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS:** natural emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event

- **MEANING BURN-OUT:** the feeling of having lost the meaning and the purpose for the work (caring is still intact)
- **PROFESSIONAL BURN-OUT** - physical, emotional, psychological, and the individual, the populations served and the organization spiritual exhaustion caused by

It is important for educators to be aware of the warning signs such as fatigue, mood swings, depression, and loss of empathy. In my own case, I was aware of some of the warning signs before I left teaching in December 2015, but I did not associate them with the process of burning out. There were other personal issues that I was facing at the time, so I associated my exhaustion to those events. However, as Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016) suggest, self-care is even more important during times of “personal crisis or excessive stress” (p. 129). I encourage teachers to watch for warning signs. Christine Maslach has conducted extensive research in the area of burn-out and has designed a survey for educators which is available [online](#). This kind of survey can help you identify warning signs.

Joys, Rewards, Gifts and Hazards of Teaching

Teachers derive high levels of job satisfaction because of the close connection to others and the opportunity to help and teach. According to a recent study, students most often describe their teachers as caring, which is an essential quality in our work. Skovholt and D’Rozario (2000), however, suggest that in order for us to maintain the caring attitude, it must be strongly guarded.

These are the joys, rewards, and gifts of our teaching practice but the profession is not without its hazards which are listed below:

- **Students:** lack of motivation / failure / high level of needs (trauma) / large classes / multi-level classes
- **Teachers:** inability to say no or set boundaries / boredom
- **Environment:** continuous enrollment / negative colleagues / precarious work / multiple jobs

In addition, teachers are among those professionals with the highest levels of job stress and burnout across many countries (Stoeber & Renner, 2008). Several researchers have cited additional factors that contribute to teachers’ stress such as increased legislative and administrative regulations, the introduction of educational standards with few professional development opportunities, and a lack of planning time and support (Action & Glasgow, 2015, Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). Therefore self-care is a way for teachers to build resilience and ensure their well-being.

Self-Care Solutions

The implementation of self-care requires a mindset change. When I returned to teaching in 2017, I realized that I needed to adopt self-care strategies if I wanted to prevent burn-out

again in the future. I strongly believe that self-care should be easy to follow, be no cost/low cost and avoid adding time to an already busy career. To achieve this, I incorporated “new tiny habits”. My new habits include walking daily, setting reasonable marking expectations, setting boundaries such as no emails at night or weekends, spending time doing things I enjoy, connecting with people important to me, and setting Sunday as a no-work/re-set day.

Participants in the TESL Ontario workshop shared some of their self-care initiatives which are coming home and spending 20 minutes of quiet time, organizing staff treat days where people take turns bringing in snacks, and using teaching strategies such as giving students “quiet” reading/desk work and playing music. The teacher who shared the last idea remarked that students liked doing this immensely. Administrators at some schools have also arranged speakers related to mental health. Teachers at these schools appreciated this effort.

Organizational Initiatives

Teacher well-being should be a concern for schools and organizations. The rise of precarious and insecure work, low wages, and a lack of health benefits has harmful health effects. According to Access Alliance (n.d.), “temporary workers earn 64% less than permanent workers and only 1 in 6 of precariously employed workers (17%) in Canada have extended health or dental insurance compared to 50% of those who are employed full-time.” Furthermore, precarious workers are three times more likely to rate their health as less than good, so the promotion of well-being through access to health benefits is needed along with more stable employment (Access Alliance, n.d.). For new teachers, stress levels are extremely high so buddies or mentorships are a good way to provide support. Spurgeon and Thompson (2018) argue that well-being should be part of teacher education programs. Teachers must also be provided proper workspaces. A friend of mine who is a college faculty indicated that personal desks were replaced by open concept shared computer stations (personal communication). During the TESL Ontario webinar on this topic on December 7, 2018, teachers indicated that a good work environment, feeling valued and respected and appreciated for their work contributed to their well-being.

Conclusion

Self-care is not an indulgence but needed in the work that we do. It is natural for teachers to put others first but we must find ways to maintain our vitality, health, and wellbeing in order to be our best for others. Teachers need to be empowered and encouraged to take care of themselves and others (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). This requires teachers and organizations to ensure that this happens.

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Author Bio

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