



ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION

# Information Brief

## Educator Mental Health and Self-Care

## EDUCATOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-CARE

Teachers and educators experience many stressors in their jobs. Whether stress comes from the demands of teaching, administrative challenges or interpersonal complications, these experiences can lead to burnout and potentially affect the students who educators interact with throughout each day.

This information brief identifies ways to help educators minimize stress, identify stress and burnout early, and both protect themselves from and cope with daily job stress.

### WHAT ASPECTS OF TEACHING AND EDUCATING MAY INCREASE RISK OF STRESS AND BURNOUT?

When interviewing teachers about the most challenging parts of their jobs, Herman and Reinke (2014) found common themes in the answers. They included lack of administrative support and unrealistic expectations, difficult colleagues, demands on time and resources, diverse student needs and differentiated instruction, negative student behaviors and attitudes, difficult parents, and limited training and preparation.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers expressed they have limited time, resources and materials to do their jobs as effectively as they would like. Teachers mentioned challenges associated with planning and preparation, as well as matching instruction to students' various skill levels. These kinds of work-related stressors add to the life stressors that teachers, and all humans, are exposed to outside of work, including relationship, financial and health stressors.<sup>1</sup>

### RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR EDUCATOR STRESS <sup>2</sup>

#### PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- ❖ Support network
- ❖ Mentors within and beyond school
- ❖ Engaging in activities that enhance physical and mental well-being
- ❖ Feelings of care and sharing
- ❖ Participation, control and choice in policies

#### RISK FACTORS

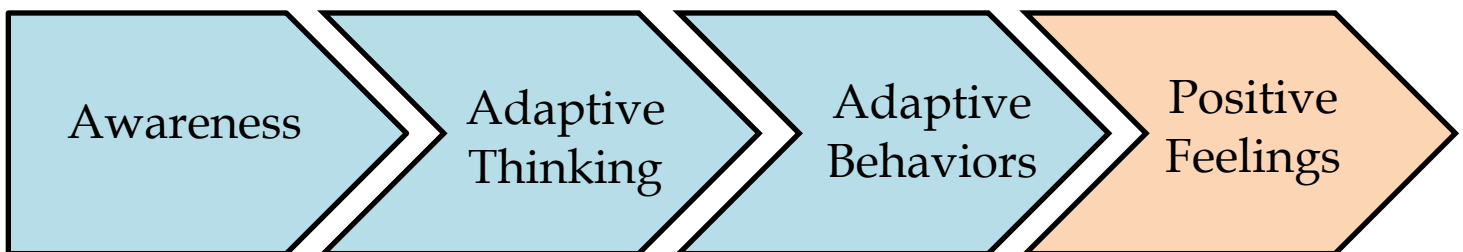
- ❖ Feelings of isolation
- ❖ Feelings of inadequacy
- ❖ Lack of communication and cooperation with parents, students or colleagues
- ❖ Unclear expectations
- ❖ Feeling disempowered

## WATCH FOR THESE SIGNS OF STRESS AND BURNOUT<sup>3</sup>

Physical Signs	Behavioral Signs	Emotional Signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Sleeping problems (insomnia, oversleeping, waking tired)</li> <li>❖ Muscle tension, aches and pains, teeth grinding</li> <li>❖ Weight loss or gain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Social withdrawal</li> <li>❖ Increased reliance on caffeine, alcohol or drugs</li> <li>❖ Relationship problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Irritability</li> <li>❖ Lack of self-esteem</li> <li>❖ Frustration or anger</li> </ul>

## STRATEGIES FOR COPING AND SELF-CARE

Though it is not possible to avoid all situations that might lead to stress, there are many ways to cope with stress when it does occur. One process that leads to increased positive feelings involves three steps<sup>1</sup>:



**Awareness of thoughts and feelings is the first step.** A person’s ability to connect with and monitor how he or she is feeling in a given moment allows the individual to catch stress early, when it does occur, and recognize the thoughts, feelings and environments that frequently lead that person to feel stress.

This awareness can give an individual the **opportunity to avoid a potential stressor** or be more prepared to handle it if the stressor is inevitable. Goal setting also plays a role in awareness, allowing a person to **reflect on and understand the things he or she wants for the future** and set goals to achieve them. This **sense of meaning and purpose** can help buffer against stress and increase well-being.<sup>4</sup>

**The second step is using adaptive thinking.** By generating positive thoughts, associations and goals related to an educator’s role as a teacher and mentor, that individual can help increase positive thoughts associated with his or her profession, be reminded of the reasons for pursuing an education career, and decrease negative thoughts that might exacerbate stress and burnout.

Taking the time to **write down the things a person enjoys most about being an educator** and keeping that list available to reread is one strategy an individual can use to increase his or her positive thoughts about teaching. Other methods an educator can use to **increase positive thoughts** include keeping a gratitude journal and taking time to reflect on his or her achievements throughout the day

**Some ways to decrease negative thoughts include:**

- ❖ Using time projection
  - Time projection is imagining the future and asking yourself whether the events of today will have any bearing on the future. For example, asking yourself “What will people remember about today one year (or five or 100 years) from now?” or “What’s the worst thing that could happen? How will I deal with it if it does happen?”
  
- ❖ Changing common errors in thinking
  - Identifying and changing common errors in thinking can help keep potential stressors in perspective, create the mental space to solve problems and keep problems from feeling overwhelming. Examples of common thinking errors are “catastrophizing” problems or feeling as if you must solve every problem on your own.

**The third set is using adaptive behaviors** to cope with stress. Examples of helpful behaviors are:

- ❖ Relaxation and mindfulness;
  - <http://www.stopbreathethink.org/meditations/mindful-breathing>
- ❖ Seeking out social support;
- ❖ Engaging in hobbies and other enjoyable activities;
- ❖ Taking the time to take care of your body by getting enough sleep, being active and eating enough nutrients.

In addition to practicing these stress management tips, it’s important to remember that you do not have to cope with stress, burnout or mental health concerns alone.

Here are some resources to help improve your mental health:

<https://www.apa.org/education/k12/teacher-stress>

<https://www.nami.org/learn-more/know-the-warning-signs>

<https://createforeducation.org/care/>

<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/get-help>

<https://www.edutopia.org/topic/teacher-wellness>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml>

## REFERENCES

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