

# 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.



## WAYS TO HELP OTHER TEACHERS

**CHECK IN ON EACH OTHER.** Just a genuine “how are you doing?” can really help a fellow teacher feel supported and more connected to the people around them. Vulnerability can be hard, so you may need to open up first to show you’re sincere. If someone tells you they’re struggling, let them know they have your support and if you can’t talk then, that you’ll reach out soon. When you follow up, make sure to listen to what they need; some people may need help finding resources, while others may want some time to vent with someone who gets it.

**HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE FOR SELF-CARE.** Share what you’re doing to maintain your own mental health and any upcoming self-care goals you have, like reading a book to unwind or what you’re up to next weekend. Ask what others are doing. Making time to take care of yourself can be hard; knowing your coworkers are aware of your plans can provide that extra bit of motivation to follow through with them, especially when you’re exhausted. Don’t forget to ask your coworkers how their self-care activity went the next time you see them!

**EXPRESS GRATITUDE.** Practicing gratitude is a great way to give yourself a more positive outlook. Try to name three things you’re thankful for each day. Thank your coworkers when they do something to help you out or make your day a bit easier and let your students and their parents know you appreciate their hard work and flexibility. It’s a win-win: it will boost your mood, make others feel appreciated and noticed, and help you all feel more connected to your community.

**TAKE TIME TO LAUGH.** Humor can be an effective coping tool during scary and tense times. Don’t be afraid to lighten the mood by sending memes or sharing a funny story—just be mindful of your timing and audience.

**PAY ATTENTION TO NONVERBAL CUES.** A lot of people have trouble opening up about how they’re feeling, and others may not even realize that they’re struggling if their mind is constantly focused on work. If you’re at school in-person, you can probably pick up on which of your colleagues or students are having a harder time than others. Typical body language varies, but if you notice a change like less eye contact or moving or talking slower, it’s worth bringing up. If your school is virtual, think about who you haven’t heard from lately that you may have expected to. Reach out to those individuals—there’s no need for anyone to suffer alone. If you aren’t comfortable doing so, mention what you’ve noticed to a colleague that they are closer with or a supervisor.

**LEND EACH OTHER SUPPORT.** There is a lot of power in shared experiences. People need social connection, and mutual feelings of vulnerability and stress often create some of the strongest social bonds.<sup>4</sup> Start up a weekly support call with a group of friends, grade-level teachers across your district, or all teachers at your school. Planning for this makes it a priority and gives you all a safe space to vent, listen, and problem-solve together. You can also help each other with work logistics—if you love teaching a certain subject or unit, offer to share your lesson plan with other grade level teachers and they can share theirs with you to split up the burden.

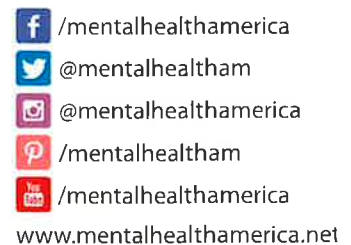
## WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you still feel overwhelmed, unable to cope and feel as though your stress is affecting how you function every day, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

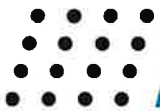
Take a screen at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhscreeen.org) to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

### SOURCES

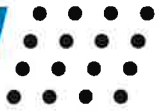
- <sup>1</sup>American Federation of Teachers. (2017). *2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey*. [https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_eqwl\\_survey\\_web.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwl_survey_web.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup>Mader, J. (2020, August 6). *As we talk about reopening schools, are the teachers ok?* The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/as-we-talk-about-reopening-schools-are-the-teachers-ok/>
- <sup>3</sup>Cox, A., Solomon, B., & Parris, D. (2018, May 8). *Teacher well-being is a critical and often overlooked part of school health*. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/teacher-well-being-is-a-critical-and-often-overlooked-part-of-school-health>
- <sup>4</sup>Seppala, E. (2012). How the stress of disaster brings people together. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-stress-of-disaster-brings-people-together/>







# MISSING HOW THINGS USED TO BE



There are a lot of things you might be missing right now. You probably know what big things you're missing, like summer activities with friends, sports games, and school dances. But chances are you're missing some small things too—things you may have taken for granted, like sitting next to your friend on the bus every day or getting to show off your new outfit. Almost every part of life has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we're all living in a completely new world than we were a year ago. As you shift to a "new normal," it's common to miss how things were before. Part of that sadness and discomfort you're feeling is actually grief.

You may have only heard of grief in terms of death, but it's a lot more than that. Grief is the emotions we feel related to loss, even if that loss is something like your typical schedule or your sense of safety and control. Grief is a complex emotion. Many people recognize five distinct stages of grief. You may not go through all of them, and you may experience them in different orders, but these are common responses to loss.

## STAGES OF GRIEF<sup>1</sup>

**DENIAL** is when you refuse to accept that a loss is factual. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though it's the same as the flu and therefore unnecessary to worry about
- o Thinking that you don't need to care about it because you're young

**ANGER** is the emotion you may feel when you want control over your fears. Rather than dealing with the problem, you might blame others and refuse to follow safety guidelines. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Not caring about shelter-in-place restrictions and seeing friends anyway
- o Blaming others for not quarantining and being the reason this is still an issue

**BARGAINING** is when you acknowledge reality but still try to maintain control. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Acting as though if people look healthy, they are fine to be around
- o Telling yourself that this will all be over by Halloween

**DESPAIR** occurs when the seriousness of the situation sets in. You may feel hopeless—like things will never get better. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Thinking that this is forever, and you'll never be able to hang out with your friends normally again
- o Worrying that many of your loved ones will die before this ends

**ACCEPTANCE** is when you finally admit that the situation is what it is—it's not great, but it's not complete doom either. Related to COVID-19, this might look like:

- o Knowing that while you can't control the pandemic, you can do your part by washing your hands, wearing a mask and keeping 6 feet of distance between yourself and anyone who doesn't live in your home
- o Acknowledging that even though you're stuck at home, there are still things you can do from a distance, like keeping up your schoolwork and connecting with friends virtually

# COPING WITH CHANGE

Most people don't like change. People are creatures of habit, and we like to stick to our normal day-to-day life. Sometimes change feels threatening – we don't know if everything will work out and we worry about all the new challenges we might face. It's normal to feel uneasy as we leave our old normal behind. If you're struggling, here are some ways to help yourself adjust:

## FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

Grief is natural. Everyone deals with it in their life, and most people are dealing with it right now in some way. Letting yourself feel however you feel – whether that's angry, sad, or worried – is the first step to feeling better. You will probably move in-between these different emotions, and even have moments of acceptance or happiness. It's okay to let yourself be sad, and it's okay to let yourself be distracted and have fun. All of it is part of the healing process.

## PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness helps you tune into your emotions – these techniques can be really helpful in situations where your routines are disrupted or you're feeling overwhelmed. You might feel so many different things that you don't even know how to start dealing with them. Try laying down, closing your eyes, and focusing on your breathing, or go for a mindful walk (pay close attention to the sounds, smells, and sights). You can also listen to a guided meditation to feel more connected to yourself.

## KEEP UP NORMAL HABITS WHEN POSSIBLE

Routines help people know what to expect throughout the day or the week—that's why change is often so uncomfortable. Figure out what you can do to keep some things the way they were before. If you're used to sitting with a certain group of friends at lunch, maybe you can do a group video call once a week and have lunch together. And even though you might not need to wake up as early as when you were physically going to school, going to bed and waking up on a schedule will help you get more restful sleep and have more energy during the day.

## THINK AHEAD

Some events that you were really looking forward to have probably been cancelled over the last few months, and that's not easy. It can be especially hard when it wasn't your decision – like if your parents or school cancelled the event. Even though it's for everyone's safety, feeling like you have no say in what happens is frustrating. Stay positive by looking to the future. Brainstorm some fun virtual events (like an online game night) for the next few weeks and make a list of other things you want to do once it's safer.

## STAY CONNECTED

Even though you can't see your friends in person, it's important to make time to talk to people and keep your support network strong. Plan a virtual game night with friends, or just send your best friend funny memes more often. It's not the same as hanging out, but just a quick conversation can help you feel less alone and more able to take on the changes that you're facing.

If you still feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, you may be experiencing the first signs of a mental health condition, like depression or anxiety.

Take the youth screen at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhascreeing.org) to see if you may be at risk. Once you get the results, MHA will provide you with more information and help you to figure out next steps.

SOURCES  
¹Axelrod, J. (2020, July 8). *The 5 stages of grief & loss*. PsychCentral.  
<https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>

