



Teaching Channel™

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Self-Care for Educators

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Introduction

The Bureau of Labor and Statistics predicts that the demand for teachers will continue to increase through 2026 estimating the need for more than 250,000 educators. This demand is occurring partly due to changes in student-teacher ratios and student enrollment, however, the largest reason for the increasing need for additional teachers is due to attrition. Learning Policy Institute (LPI) documented this teacher attrition rate in a recent report.

The LPI report also points to new teachers leaving at a rate between 19% and 30% in their first five years as a major impact on the increased demand for educators. Additionally, the overall rate of attrition of teachers in the US is at an 8% average, which is double the attrition rate in countries where educator retention is a high priority.

There are several reasons teachers leave the profession including, but not limited to, a lack of resources, poor pay, and challenging political environments. The reasons teachers leave the profession mirror the main causes of teacher burnout.

CAUSES OF TEACHER BURNOUT INCLUDE:

- A lack of administrative support
- An overemphasis on standardized testing
- Evaluation of teachers based on standardized testing scores
- Increasingly difficult student behavior with increases in frequency and severity
- Challenging home lives of children that teachers cannot control
- A lack of personnel/proper staffing
- Forcing teachers to teach outside their area of expertise
- Inadequate prep time
- Extreme amounts of paperwork
- A lack of respect for the profession
- Challenging interactions with parents
- A lack of resources
- A lack of training for new initiatives and technology

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), "[job] burnout is a special type of work-related stress — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity." [Warning signs of teacher burnout](#) can include being easily angered or irritated, a lack of desire to attend social gatherings, and chronic fatigue, insomnia, or exhaustion.

Additional Resource:

[The Causes of Teacher Burnout: What Everyone Needs to Know](#) by Keely Keller

"Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress - a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity."

Surveys and rating scales exist to give teachers insight into their level of burnout, some [formal](#) and some [informal](#). Qualifying an educator's level of burnout can help guide a path to healing. It is possible to decrease teacher burnout. Leaders can [focus on resilience](#), prioritize educator self-care, and encourage self-care plans. Self-care alone will not eliminate burnout, but it can help prevent and mitigate burnout. Additionally, it is important for educational stakeholders, and society, to increase the level of [respect for teaching as a profession](#) while developing new systems and norms to decrease the overwhelming number of responsibilities and challenges teachers face daily.

The Importance of Self Care

Dr. Matthew Glowiak, a clinical faculty member in Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) Master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program, succinctly summed up the importance of self-care.

"Burning the candle at both ends, so-to-speak, comes with significant consequences, which may include but are not limited to burnout, depression, anxiety, resentment, and a whole host of other negative implications. Engaging in a self-care routine has been clinically proven to reduce or eliminate anxiety and depression, reduce stress, improve concentration, minimize frustration and anger, increase happiness, improve energy, and more. From a physical health perspective, self-care has been clinically proven to reduce heart disease, stroke, and cancer. Spiritually, it may help keep us in tune with our higher power as well as realize our meaning in life."

Self-care must be more than "treating yourself" as it's meant to shift the focus from *doing for others* to *doing what you need* at that moment. According to Bernadette Chavez Piñon, CARE Counselor at the University of Texas at Austin, "It's a way of living each day that incorporates behaviors that help you feel refreshed, re-energized, and rested." **Self-care is grounded in science and is research-based.**

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF SELF-CARE INCLUDE:

- Increased self-compassion
- Improved self-regulation and emotional management during challenging situations
- Reboot to mental energy
- Improved patience
- Lower blood pressure
- Improved general health and immune system
- A more balanced, happier life
- Elevation in mood
- Increase in productivity
- Curbing effect of sugar cravings
- Improved sleep
- Provides a break from stress, anxiety, and technology
- Improved cognitive functioning including efficiency and memory

In 2020, the world experienced a global pandemic, social and civil unrest, and a high-intensity presidential election. In addition, individuals and families worked through their own personal and professional challenges. COVID-19 and the corresponding problems left individuals scared, anxious, tired, and sometimes even angry. [Mental health issues](#) increased in number and severity. There were concerns about [increasing domestic abuse](#) and [lower reporting rates of child abuse](#). People battling addiction had a higher chance of relapsing due to an inability to attend meetings along with an increase in stress levels. Children were not going to school. The health care system changed. All these factors created new and bigger challenges for individuals. For these reasons, self-care has become even more important for *everyone* including children and the elderly. The Mayo Clinic, in their blog, "Self-Care Tips During the COVID-19 Pandemic," advised people to contact their health care provider for help and guidance if any of the following become persistent or interfere with daily functioning:

- Trouble focusing on daily activities
- Anxiety that turns into feelings of being out of control
- Strong feelings that interfere with daily activities
- Having emotions that become difficult to manage
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness

Self-awareness and paying attention to how others are feeling and functioning are important. Once we know self-care is needed, a simple self-care plan and routine can make a tremendous difference in overall health and wellbeing.

Simple Strategies for Self-Care

To develop systems for self-care, it can be helpful to categorize into three areas: body, mind, and soul. A focus on these key areas will ensure people reap the benefits of a solid self-care plan. Educators may consider using this [downloadable self-care plan](#) or developing one of their own.

Taking Care of the Body

1. Sleep

Habits come into play when considering sleeping for self-care. These habits are also called, "sleep hygiene." The first step to improving sleep hygiene is by observing the sleep cycle using a sleep journal. [Sleepeducation.org](#) provides healthy sleep tips like keeping a consistent sleep schedule and avoiding caffeinated beverages in the late afternoon and evenings. They also recommend turning off electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime. The development of sleep routines can improve the quality of sleep and the positive impacts of it.

2. Exercise

Exercise reduces anxiety and depression, increases executive functioning, and can help the brain better resist stress. The Mayo Clinic outlined [7 benefits of exercise](#):

- Exercise controls weight
- Exercise combats health conditions and diseases
- Exercise improves mood

"The development of sleep routines can improve the quality of sleep and the positive impacts of it."

- Exercise boosts energy
- Exercise promotes better sleep
- Exercise puts the spark back into your sex life
- Exercise can be fun... and social!

Educators might want to consider strength training exercises for all major muscle groups at least twice a week and at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity (or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity, or a combination of moderate and vigorous activity.) Busy professionals like teachers can take small steps towards building an exercise routine by incorporating a walk a day or a new fitness activity. Starting small can improve routines and provide successes to add to a person's motivation to stick with it.

"Starting small can improve routines and provide successes to add to a person's motivation to stick with it."

3. Nutrition

Stress and nutrition are connected and even more so for the busy teaching professional. Eating a healthy breakfast can set the stage for better eating over the course of the day. Breakfast food choices high in protein can improve focus and keep educators (and students) feeling full longer. "Eating the rainbow" is another way to improve choices around nutrition. It reminds people to eat fresh foods of different colors every day. Adding in 1 or 2 servings of vegetables a day is a good start!

Also, hydration and nutrition go hand in hand. Recommendations for daily water consumption remind everyone to drink $\frac{1}{2}$ of their body weight in ounces of water per day. (If a person weighs 160 lbs., they should drink at least 80 oz. of water daily.) Keeping a water bottle nearby can make this easier, as can limiting other beverages like coffee and soda.

Taking Care of the Mind

1. Mindset

Dr. Carol Dweck's research has provided many insights about the importance of having a growth (vs. fixed) mindset. Individuals with a growth mindset are more flexible adapting to challenging situations better than those with a fixed mindset. Having a growth mindset can increase the likelihood that a person will grow from failures and celebrate successes. Educators can improve their mindsets, and so can students. Individuals can build a growth mindset by embracing imperfection, taking risks, and even cultivating a sense of purpose or finding their "why". Working toward a growth mindset is a form of self-care!

2. Reflection

John Dewey has been quoted as saying, "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience." Self-care through reflection can be accomplished through meditation, prayer, or talking to a trusted colleague. Skovolt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) found that releasing negative emotions through writing can help practitioners guard against burnout. Fun writing prompts can be helpful to get started or a "brain dump" strategy works, too.

"Not only is reflection powerful for self-care, but it is also a key component of learning."

Engaging in professional learning or any type of learning like taking a class, watching a webinar, or learning a new skill, provides an opportunity for reflection, too. It's good for teachers to role model learning and reflection for their students as well as include time and opportunity for learners to reflect themselves. Not only is reflection powerful for self-care, but it is also a key component of learning.

3. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a powerful method to help keep a person's thinking and actions in check. It's also an excellent strategy to teach children and teens, and educators can learn and practice right alongside them. Mindful breathing can make a world of difference in stressful situations. Taking a few deep breaths to calm the mind is one helpful strategy.

Gratitude is another part of mindfulness. Research on the positive impacts of gratefulness indicates it has a lasting impact on the brain. Educators can build gratefulness into their personal daily routine and should provide opportunities for expressing gratitude in lessons. While the benefits of gratitude take time, it is still a constructive form of self-care.

Consider the following engaging, universally accessible prompt for a writing assignment of any length: Tell about three things for which you are most grateful.

Taking a break from technology is a mindful action and a form of self-care. The feeling of *always* being plugged in may be the source of a work-life imbalance. Educators should avoid connecting work email to personal smart devices. Educators can set healthy tech-use boundaries for themselves. They can monitor how much time they are spending on social media and set a schedule for when they will work at home. Teachers could schedule time completely unplugged from phones (or any other tech sources that may be keeping them from being present in the moment). It can be helpful to place the cell phone in another room, out of sight, to disrupt the pattern of checking it. Another idea is to charge the phone and other technology in a room other than the bedroom. This can have positive impacts on sleep, too. Remember, screen breaks aren't just for kids! If people use technology all day, every day, they will need to press pause on occasion and allow themselves to power down.

Taking Care of the Soul

1. Self-Awareness

The CASEL Framework on Social-Emotional Learning defines self-awareness as "the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts." Improving self-awareness begins with the identification of feelings. Keeping an emotion journal can be helpful for some. Self-awareness includes gaining a sense of a person's individual strengths and areas of improvement. To increase positivity, educators should work in their strength areas whenever possible. Understanding how an individual's personal, social, cultural, and linguistic identities and assets impact their own behaviors is important as well. For teachers, learning how

and when to say “no” can be challenging. Having a “no statement” prepared can be helpful when a teacher is asked to help with an initiative they cannot take on. Also, knowing when and what to say “yes” to can greatly improve positivity especially if the “yes” is related to an area of interest, strength, or passion. Self-awareness allows people to identify what is personally challenging, rewarding, motivating, etc. for them. Finally, [self-awareness](#) is important for both teachers and their students.

"Having a 'no statement' prepared can be helpful when a teacher is asked to help with an initiative they cannot take on."

2. Music

Music increases the brain’s dopamine (which is the “feel-good” hormone) and can help improve a teacher's mood. Creating a playlist of songs that have a significant and positive association is an effective form of self-care. Music connects to human emotions easily. It can impact heart and breathing rates. Music therapist, Amanda Williams, MTA, MT-BC, NMT, recommends the creation of a calming playlist by finding “...songs with a bpm (beats per minute) between 60-80 – the average resting heart rate.” She also advocates for music-making! Participating in music has positive impacts on mood, self-esteem, cognitive functioning, memory, and focus. It’s never too late to learn a new skill (growth mindset).

3. Laughter

“Laughter is the physical manifestation of finding something funny, and it can help to reduce inflammation and stress hormones, improve circulation, and enhance the immune system,” says Everyday Health Wellness Advisory Board member Heidi Hanna, Ph.D. Laughing releases endorphins or “feel good” brain chemicals just like music, and it is an effective (and fun) form of self-care. Adding items that cause smiles or laughs to your workspace is one laughter strategy for teachers. (Consider a funny postcard, cartoon, novel pen, or even a joke website or comic video bookmarked in a website browser.) Learning to laugh about individual situations can help alleviate stress. Spending time with friends and family members to share a laugh is a worthwhile self-care activity. Laughter has immense short-term and long-term impacts on people and is a research-based and fun method of self-care!

"Spending time with friends and family members to share a laugh is a worthwhile self-care activity. Laughter has immense short-term and long-term impacts on people and is a research-based and fun method of self-care!"

Curated Resources

Blogs

- [What is Self-Care and Why is it Important For You?](#) by Dr. Matthew Glowiak via the SNHU Newsroom
- [Portable Practices for Promoting Self Care](#) by Meg Richard via TCHERS' Voice Blog
- [10 Fun Questions to Increase Self-Awareness & Avoid Teacher Burnout](#) by Keely Keller via Learners Edge Chalk Blog
- [Avoid Burnout with Good Self-Care](#) by Heidi Green via HealthyPlace

- [Can mindfulness help stressed teachers stay in the classroom?](#) By Chris Berdik via The Hechinger Report
- [15 Smart Ways to Prevent Teacher Burnout That Really Work](#) by Caralee Adams via We Are Teachers
- [Teacher Burnout Education: Tips to Reduce Stress](#) by Marina Khidekel via Thrive Global
- [20+ Teacher Power Foods to Keep You Going](#) by We Are Teachers Staff
- [How Busy Educators Are Fitting in Fitness](#) by NEA (National Education Association) Member Benefits Staff
- [Ways to Cultivate Your Emotional Resilience This Year](#) by Elena Aguilar via Edutopia
- [10 Ways to Improve Your Resilience](#) by Kendra Cherry via Very Well Mind
- [12 Choices to Help You Step Back From Burnout](#) by Vicki Davis via Edutopia
- [Happy Teachers Practice Self-Care](#) by Madeline Will via Education Week

Videos

- [Self-Care for Teachers](#) by Susanne Leslie via Learners Edge Chalk Blog
- [Six Self-Care Videos for Teachers](#) by Keely Keller via Learners Edge Chalk Blog
- [Kicking Stress Brings Balance to the Classroom](#) via Teaching Channel
- [Thank a Teacher](#) via TakePart
- [My Favorite Teacher](#) via Man On the Street
- [Learn to shine bright- the importance of self-care for teachers](#) by Kelly Hopkinson by TedXNorwichED
- [In This School District, Health and Wellness Start With Teachers](#) via EdWeek
- [Prioritizing Teacher Self-Care](#) via Edutopia
- [How Self-Care Changed My Life: A Teacher's Journey](#) by Erica Bronkhorst
- [Move Your Way: Tips for Getting Motivated](#) by the Office of Disease Promotion and Health Prevention
- [FUNNY Stress Management Techniques](#) by TEDx Speaker Karyn Buxman

Podcasts

- [Ten Percent Happier with Dan Harris](#) via ABC News
- [Self-Care for Educators](#) by Tina H. Boogren, PhD.
- [Chalk Full of Life](#) by Kelli Wise
- [Mind Love](#) by Melissa Monte
- [Truth for Teachers](#) by Angela Watson

Webinars

- [Anxiety Awareness](#) via Learners Edge
- [Mindfulness for Teachers](#) via Learners Edge
- [Fireproof: Building Teacher Resilience](#) via Learners Edge
- [Simple Steps to Self-Care for Educators](#) by Amy Speidel via Conscious Discipline
- [The Value of Educator Self-Care](#) via Teaching Tolerance
- [The Healthy, Happy Educator: How to Create an Individualized Self-Care Plan](#) by Tina Boogren via Solution Tree

Conclusion

Self-care is imperative for everyone to live a healthy, happy life, both personally and professionally. It is important for teachers, school staff, and administrators to prioritize self-care and encourage self-care plans. A self-care plan that allows for goal setting, priorities, and action items in the areas of body, mind, and soul will help people develop and follow through with a self-care routine. Identifying support systems, resources, and celebrations when a goal is achieved can further motivate individuals working to improve their self-care. To get started with a self-care plan, Learners Edge invites educators to:

- Download the [self-care plan template](#). (This document must be saved to a computer, typed into, and then saved again.) Learners Edge recommends the plan be printed and posted to keep it top of mind for busy educators.
- Consider taking one of the courses in the [Educator Wellness](#) category.
 - Check out [5116: Connection and Calming Strategies for Today's Teachers](#). It is brand new, and teachers are already raving about it!
- Watch a webinar on [mindfulness](#) or [educator resilience](#), or dig into a [3-part series on anxiety](#).

Meet the Author



Keely Keller is the Director of Professional Learning for Teaching Channel in Eagan, Minnesota. She holds a Bachelor's of Science in Special Education from St. Cloud State University, a Master's of Arts in Education from Hamline University, and additional Director of Special Education and Principal Licensures from the University of Minnesota. Throughout her career, Keely served students with special needs and subsequently served as a Special Education Coordinator in a suburban Minnesota school district. She taught as an adjunct instructor at St. Mary's University of Minnesota and has been developing training and providing face-to-face and online professional development for many years. Professional Learning is her passion. She also enjoys camping, hiking, and laughing with family and friends.

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