

Prepare Yourself for Your Return to School

Mitigate the Adverse Emotional Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic

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Teaching during this pandemic has been an arduous challenge. . . but teachers have refused to back down or back away from it. Relentlessly and with amazing creativity and ingenuity they have worked, day after day after day. . . they have continued to show up every day to give us their best, despite what it has been doing to them.— from Teachers of the Pandemic (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/teachers-of-the-pandemic/>)

Sustained stress can lead to a variety of emotional and cognitive problems, such as anxiety, higher levels of baseline fear, excessive worrying and ruminating, irritability, depression, difficulty initiating and sustaining sleep, trouble concentrating, problems with memory and decision making, and diminished motivation. Sustained stress can also lead to a variety of physical problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, eating and digestive complications, and a breakdown of the immune system. While everyone has a personal responsibility to manage their own emotional wellness—to be aware of the stress they are experiencing, what it is doing to them, and what they can do to manage it—everyone also has a professional responsibility to do what is necessary to stay emotionally fit for their job as an educator. Teaching children is a very demanding job. It cannot be done well by people who are unable to manage emotional wellness.

This article will present what educators can do right now to help minimize the impact of stress and feel more resolved as they prepare themselves to go back to school in the fall. A comprehensive approach to maintaining mental and emotional wellness regarding stress is to 1) prevent/eliminate what you can, 2) interrupt it as it builds, and if it builds to a serious level, 3) make deliberate efforts to reset your body's stress response. We can't always prevent higher levels of stress, especially during unusual circumstances such as this pandemic, but we can interrupt it and reset to calm periodically throughout the day. Adverse effects from stress are not necessarily caused by the frequency or the magnitude of the stress, but by the duration of the stress response. When stress cannot be limited in its frequency or intensity, we must focus on interrupting it.

There are many things you can do during the work day to mitigate the adverse impact of teaching during the pandemic. What is happening in the world is not within your control, but how you manage yourself and attend to your own experience of it, along with your own wellness, is within your control and it is your primary responsibility as you stay healthy for work and for your family.

You can use the material from [Understand the Adverse Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic](#) to make note of what teaching during the pandemic is doing to you, and you can use the recommendations below to put together a plan, to take charge of your life, so you can do better and feel better and be more prepared to work in school in the fall. You should not wait for inspiration or wait until you feel like doing it. It's just something you have to make yourself do, and it may always be that way, until life gets a little easier.

Prevent/Eliminate Some of the Sources of Stress

1) Define success in realistic terms. Do this again every day. Every day make it a point to define what success will look like, given what you learned the day before. Check with your

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colleagues to get a better read on what is possible given the time and the methods and resources available, and especially given the limited access you have to students. Even if students can be reached and engaged (many cannot), there is so much in the home environment that competes for their attention, that alters their mood and motivation in a way that makes them less accessible.

In some instances, you may make more progress with independent work and in other cases direct instruction is more successful. On some days you are just trying to maintain your role and your relationship with a student, with the eventual goal that you can engage them in completing work with you. At the end of the day, congratulate yourself for achieving the success you planned, celebrate results that exceeded expectations, and revise your goals if you discovered new obstacles. Actively and realistically define for yourself, what success looks like.

2) Set up a realistic schedule and stick with it. Run your schedule instead of always letting your schedule run you. There are not enough hours in the day for you to accomplish everything you would like to accomplish. Some of your time will be devoted to group lessons and some to individual sessions. Some of your time will be devoted to organizing and sending out assignments and some to correcting those assignments and delivering feedback. Some of your time will be used to communicate with parents and some will be used to research methods, materials, and technology. Some of your time will be spent in meetings or checking in with colleagues.

That's a lot coming at you all at once, but it doesn't have to be coming at you. If you want to avoid feeling attacked by the demands of the job, define the day by setting up a visual schedule that matches the activities with the best time to complete those activities (e.g., don't check your emails as they come in, but only during a designated time). All the other things on the list that are not getting done at the present time can weigh on you unless you have a schedule that shows when they will get the attention they require. The day can be very unpredictable, and even if it isn't there won't be enough time in the day to get everything done, to see all the students the way you want to, so make a schedule that is realistic with the time you actually have available and create a "save for later" category or a "to do" list that you can add to as needed (and keep an open slot in the day for this). Your schedule will help you define and focus on you are accomplishing, rather than all that isn't getting done. If schedule design is not your strength, ask a colleague who is good at it to help you.

3) Distinguish personal, family and work periods in a visual schedule. Make a visual schedule of the day that shows home/parent periods of time as well as work time. Your day will be broken into three types of activities: 1) personal time, 2) family time and 3) work time. While all this happens in one place any time all day long, it's easy for everything to blur and for one responsibility to intrude into and interfere with the others, and for you to feel like you're not doing anything well enough. The visual schedule is for you, so you can operate within the boundaries you've made for your day, and so you can see how and when you are meeting all your commitments (instead of being consumed with the feeling that you are never doing enough and you spend your day saying "no, not now"). It is also for others (your spouse, your children) who can get confused when they see you home but you are unavailable to them. It's to help others to hold onto their needs and to feel more assured that their needs are indeed getting met, because they can see when that happens in the schedule. You can even create a sign or an icon to hang next to the schedule, especially if you have young children. One side can be the teacher icon and the flip side can be the parent icon.

Think about breaking up the day with a variety of family, personal and school activities that can be reflected in your visual schedule. You might have breakfast with your children, and then after

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teaching for a few hours you may have activity time with your children, followed by more teaching, maybe lunch and a walk with your children, and then a chance to exercise briefly or take a wellness break after another teaching period. The day doesn't have to be a solid school day for six straight hours or more. The difficulty we have teaching children from home also offers us an opportunity to broaden the day and use the time creatively to meet competing needs throughout the day, including our own wellness needs.

4) Establish a way to check in with colleagues every day. One of the best ways to prevent stress build up is to connect with colleagues, share frustrations and concerns, offer support, share helpful tips and advice, offer validation and create a sense of belonging. This happens naturally during the school day when schools are open, and it's a critical coping strategy, but it won't happen now, while we're isolated, unless it's arranged. People who are isolated, not part of a team and who have little access to social support or guidance while on the job are more at risk from job burnout and stress.

Find a natural group among the faculty in your building and/or within the district. The check-in period can be brief, 15 minutes, but it's important that it happens in a predictable way, such as every day at the same time. Maybe you use this to start the day or a way to debrief and bring closure to the day.

5) Train your brain to search for the positive in the day. Some people are naturally inclined to do this, but the vast majority of us are not. It is important to reflect on the positive emotional impact from the pandemic, because you want to ensure that you are bringing that with you when you return to school in the fall. Positive experiences are often overshadowed by negative experiences, so it's easy for the positive experiences to slip by unnoticed, and thus we lose the positive memories, but that is a loss we cannot afford after dealing with such difficulty.

Find a way to ask yourself one or more of the questions below every day (and throughout the day). The more you ask these questions (and engage in the act of remembering the good), the more you are creating the space in your brain to recognize these experiences when they happen. These are experiences that create a sense of balance, a feeling of control, and a sense of well-being. These are experiences that turn down or turn off the stress response. Asking yourself these questions often, and prompting yourself to remember, is probably the most significant thing you can do to prevent the build up of stress.

Display the questions and the memory prompts in your work area as a reminder. Do not worry about the answers to the questions, asking the question is the primary part of the exercise. Remember, through the process of asking the question you are creating the space in the brain for recognizing the experiences when they occur. Gradually you will get much better at finding these experiences, even when you are not looking for them.

If you don't attempt to notice and store the memories of these experiences, there is a good chance that these wonderful experiences will be forgotten and they won't be there to take good care of you when you experience stress. It takes practice and commitment, just like physical fitness takes regular exercise. Here are the questions you should ask yourself (choose from the list).

What obstacles did you overcome today and what obstacles have you overcome since this started?

What has made you feel proud to call yourself an educator?

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What have been some heartwarming moments you experienced?

What have you learned and what do you continue to learn that you never would have learned without the pandemic?

How have you grown and adapted in ways that surprised you or impressed you?

Who or what do you appreciate even more as a result of this experience?

In what ways are you better or stronger from this experience?

Remember your acts of kindness

Remember your acts of compassion, the times you reached out and offered support

Remember when people were kind to you or showed you compassion or reached out to you with a note of appreciation.

6) Limit the input of stressful information. Do not watch every newscast on TV or continuously check your computer for Covid 19 updates throughout the day. Add up how much time you spend consuming news and set a goal for reducing that. The volume of information can be overwhelming for your brain and the content can be emotionally upsetting.

Limit your circulation of disturbing information. It is a natural way to build support, to bond around the negative, the outrageous. The more often you repeat and spread negative information the more indelible the memory of it becomes in your own mind and the more it becomes your reality, darkens your mood and adds to your stress. In addition, limit how much you discuss bad news with members of your family. Try to avoid creating a culture of hopelessness. You may not be able to create a culture of hope (but you could try, many people have done just that), but at least limit how much you contribute to the family's level of collective despair.

7) Reach out to colleagues and friends. Spend as much time as possible connecting with people who usually help you feel good about yourself, people who appreciate you and genuinely care about you, people who encourage you and lift you up. Check in with them, ask how they're doing. Just asking about them is an act of caring that will help you feel connected and quiet your stress response. Share stories, photos, and meaningful videos. Contribute to a culture of hope and optimism. Report on what is working, share successes as well as heartwarming moments.

8) Frequently express your gratitude. Express thanks and appreciation to the people you are close to, your family and your friends, certain colleagues, but also people that you casually encounter throughout your day. Maybe someone sent you a note of encouragement, or a moving music video, just because they were thinking of you and wanted you to know they care. The biological benefits of expressing gratitude are found in the one who is expressing the gratitude, not necessarily the recipient of the gratitude. The more frequently you engage in this practice, the greater the benefit and the more you are changing your brain's ability to find things worth appreciating. This takes practice, at first, and commitment, but it is one of the best things you can do to lower the stress response and lower your blood pressure.

9) Try to focus on the benefits of working from home during the pandemic. Certainly the drawbacks outweigh the benefits, but there are benefits and they should not be overlooked if

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you want to maintain a balanced view of your experience, one that will lower your stress. People have more time in their day because they don't have to commute to and from work (or to and from their children's activities). They are saving money on gas as well as car repairs and they have eliminated the daily aggravation of traffic and the stress of driving during inclement weather and arriving to work or home or picking up children from activities on time. People are spending more time and becoming closer as a family. Colleagues are meeting in groups, planning together, supporting each other, forming close bonds and coming to appreciate each other more because this pandemic has created the necessity. Teams that are working together are strengthening, finding out more about each other. Teachers are learning new methods of instruction that will remain useful following the pandemic. While there is so much to do in the course of the day, teachers report that the pace has been slowed because less can be accomplished at one time. The home environment offers more flexibility and more autonomy for getting a variety of things done while also meeting the job demands. Try to remember all these things and more. It will help with the frustration and resentment you might sometimes feel.

Interrupt Stress as it Builds

We can't always prevent higher levels of stress. . .but we can interrupt it and reset to calm periodically throughout the day. Adverse effects from stress are not necessarily caused by the frequency or the magnitude of the stress, but by the duration of the stress response. When stress cannot be limited in its frequency or intensity, we must focus on interrupting it.

1) Go outside for brief, prescribed periods throughout the day. While you're confined to your home, take advantage of this time to slow down and notice more of what is happening in your own yard, in your natural surroundings. By staying more in one space you have the privilege of seeing more of life, not less, more that is always happening but you may have missed it when life made you move faster, always on the go from one place to another. This is the time of the year when birds are very active. They have their patterns and routines just like we do, so you have a chance to become familiar with those activities and familiar with those creatures. Maybe the same rabbit shows up at the same time and in the same place every day. Maybe you notice the way that pairs of the same birds work as a team trying to build a nest. Walk around your yard and you will see growth and progress as the plants begin to unfold in their beauty.

The plants and the trees, the animals, the sun and the breeze don't know anything about the pandemic, so it will be a healthy break to spend some time looking at what they have to tell you. They show us their determination, their perseverance, and they bring hope, beauty, and revitalization. As your stress builds during the day, or right after a particularly stressful encounter, make yourself go outside for a brief period and appreciate the wonders of nature. Don't promise yourself that you will do it at the end of the day. Take ten minutes before your next task, soak up the sun, breathe the fresh air, appreciate the vastness of the sky, listen to the sounds of nature in your yard and appreciate the colors and the beauty. This experience will trigger the nervous system to reset the stress response. It's easy, readily available and highly effective.

2) Have a play break with your child. Put these breaks into your schedule, rather than waiting until you are completely done with work. Going outside for this activity has an added benefit (see #1), especially if the activity involves a lot of movement or exercise. Take a walk and turn it into a scavenger hunt, which has the added benefit of shifting and focusing your attention to the present. Maybe you will make a puzzle or build something together with blocks, or color together. Show this time on your visual schedule so your child will see when it is happening and

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feel reassured, and so you will be reminded, even in the middle of work, that you have that to look forward to.

The important features of this "stress interruption" strategy are: 1) you are spending time with your child, meeting some of their emotional needs so your child will be less distressed when you return to work, 2) you will feel less conflicted about working and feeling like you are neglecting your own child, 3) your attention and focus will be distracted from work, giving your brain a chance to reset the stress response, 4) the process of bonding with and connecting with someone you love will provide an oxytocin boost which serves to shut down the production of stress hormones.

3) Use immersion tasks, focus tasks that can give your brain something else to do.

Activities that require concentration, particularly visual activities (coloring, tracing, completing mazes, finding hidden objects or pictures, Sudoku, puzzles, tangrams, origami, knitting or sewing) bring your brain into the present. Shifting a stressed mood is not always done by trying to solve problems that can't readily be solved, even though that is what our instinct tells us to do. Shifting a stressed mood when things are just difficult or discouraging, when problems cannot be readily solved, is often a matter of finding a way of letting stressed thoughts and feelings fade more to the background by giving the mind something else to do. While immersed in the task at hand, you are using the analytical part of your brain which enables the emotional parts of your brain to rest and reset.

Pick an activity that fits your interests and strengths, one that will cause you to be immersed but not cause you to be frustrated, and give yourself a diet of involvement with this activity a few times during the day (or as needed, when you feel the build up of stress and the need to interrupt it). Five or ten minutes is plenty of time to reset.

4) Shift the scene. Step away from the computer periodically and engage in a totally different task, such as unloading the dishwasher, putting in a load of laundry, watering the house plants. Take a walk outside to get the mail or check on something in your garden. Walk around your house and look out the window. Have a snack with your child. Scene shifts can be very brief, just enough to engage your brain in the process of orienting and grounding in the present. When so much time is spent focused on the screen it's easy for the brain to lose a sense of context, to feel disoriented and disconnected and consumed by stress. Changes in scene, different people, different places, different surroundings, can reset the stress response by putting things into proper context.

5) Engage in a regular diet of leisure tasks that give you great satisfaction. Leisure tasks are activities that give you great comfort and satisfaction. They are brain resetting activities because they soothe you, because they are associated with comfort and enjoyment, because they cause you to feel productive or skilled at a time where you might be prone to feeling helpless and less effective. Remember what you enjoy and get back to that, build it into your day. Maybe you like to knit or draw or cook or sew, or read or play games. Label the activity (it's a leisure break) so it has a defined purpose, and schedule it as if you need a diet of leisure in your day. Don't wait until you have time, until you have accomplished everything else that was important to do. Put it into your schedule or you may never get to it.

6) Maintain an ongoing project. This intervention helps because it can bring you some constancy along with a sense of productivity from one day to the next. While circumstances can be unpredictable and stress can elevate at any time, you can always get back to the familiarity and routine of your ongoing project and feel more productive and in control. As you are about to complete one of your projects, identify your next project. Maybe you are modifying your garden

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or adding onto your deck, giving the bedrooms a fresh coat of paint, cleaning out closets, organizing photos, making a slide show, building a piece of furniture, organizing your music, planning a wedding or a birthday party for your child, etc.

When you engage in creating order, restoring order or improving things, you develop a greater sense of control. Stress makes us feel out of control and causes us to lose sight of just how much control we have. Fix, repair, build something, improve something, make something better than it was. You will feel capable and competent and in more control. In addition, it will be a distraction and possibly a form of physical exertion, taking advantage of those other methods of stress reduction. Furthermore, when your place is neat and in order you feel less stressed. Clutter and disorder or chaotic environments are processed subconsciously as a stressor.

7) Create a slide show. Use the photo program in your computer to make a slide show from the photos of what you care deeply about, photos of your children at various ages, places that have given you treasured memories, natural beauty in your surroundings, pets/animals doing cute or heartwarming things. Select music to match the emotion of the photos. Find a way to relax and spend some time with your creation. Just five minutes of viewing a well-crafted slide show can interrupt the stress response, especially if it has soothing music. Use headphones to eliminate interfering noise and find a private spot so you can focus without distraction.

8) Spend time with a pet. The look in your dog's eyes and the feel of the cat purring as you pat it on the head can create an "oxytocin effect", increasing your body's production of oxytocin which will lower your stress response. Oxytocin is a hormone that promotes bonding, but it also acts to shut down the production of stress hormones while promoting the production of serotonin, the neurochemical of calm. In the middle of your work day or at a time when your stress needs interrupting, seek out your pet.

9) Debrief with a colleague. When it is difficult to reset from stress, it follows you from one activity to the next, it might be helpful to debrief with a colleague, so you can feel heard and understood by someone who knows what you're experiencing.

Reset the Body's Stress Response

Just as the body can trigger a stress response in the brain, we can do things to relax the body in a way that will signal to the brain that the stress episode is over, the danger has past. Most of our stress is not caused by things that are happening to us. Instead, most of our stress is caused by things that we are thinking about that might happen, or things that happened and are over, but we're still thinking about them.

Engage in one or more of these activities when stress interruption has not been effective or when you feel significant discomfort in your body (e.g., difficulty getting a full breath, stomach or digestive unease, joint aches, fatigue). It is also advisable to use these activities when you feel emotionally impacted about something you just witnessed or experienced, to avoid storing the physiological or "whole body" memory of the experience. After a call, conversation, or interaction where you feel emotionally impacted, and before you head into your next task, engage in one of the physiologically resetting activities below. The more we can relax the body under these circumstances, the less likely we are to feel intrusive emotional reactions long after the experience is past.

1) Reset the body with specific breathing techniques. Certain breathing techniques open up airways, dilate blood vessels, and trigger a relaxation response by stimulating the vagus nerve to initiate the body's calming response. Everyone knows how to breathe, even without ever

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thinking about it. But this type of breathing, breathing to calm the body, is intentional, under your conscious control. It takes practice and focus before it becomes a healthy habit. This will lower heart rate and blood pressure as well as the production of stress hormones.

Find a quiet spot in your house, away from noise, people and commotion (and your phone and the TV). Stare straight ahead with a relaxed/unfocussed gaze. Sit up straight. Breathe in through your nose while counting to three or four, hold that breath for a count of one, then let it out slowly through your slightly open mouth for a count of 6 to 8. Pause after letting out your breath, then repeat until you've completed 10 breaths. Repeat another 10 breaths if needed. This may take 3 or 4 minutes. When you are finished, sit for a minute, take in your surroundings, and note how you feel. Try to do this three or four times a day, at logical points of transition, or whenever you feel your stress is getting too high or when you feel yourself getting emotionally upset.

Make it a priority to designate an area free from intrusion. Close the door to the room you are using. This will give you a psychological as well as a physical barrier to intrusion. Use noise cancelling headphones, if you have them or a sound machine that produces white noise. Be patient with yourself. Sometimes you will notice a profound effect and other times only a little effect. Stick with your routine of doing it. Over time, you will condition your brain and body to work together and the results will be more reliable.

2) Engage in progressive muscle relaxation. Progressive muscle relaxation is another stress resetting intervention because it changes what your body communicates to the stress center of your brain. Tense the muscle group or area, hold for a few seconds, and then release the tension. Do this to each area a few times. The most important areas to tense and relax are the stomach and abdominal areas. This will directly stimulate the vagus nerve in a way to engage the relaxation response. Otherwise, start at the toes and feet and work up the body through the legs and abdomen, torso, arms, shoulders and neck, and end with the muscles of the jaw and face. The muscles of the face can communicate emotion to the brain. Anger, frustration, sadness, worry, and stress all activate muscles in the face that stimulate emotional centers of the brain. You may not be upset at all, but if your face is held too long in a frowning position (or stressed position) you will eventually feel somewhat upset.

3) Exercise regularly and with a familiar routine. Gyms and exercise classes have been closed so the pandemic requires people to be creative with their exercise programs. Exercise that is a disrupted, disjointed and primarily a random experience may not do much to relieve stress, so put some time into creating a routine that you can repeat, a routine that can become familiar in what you do, where you do it, and when you do it. When you do the same exercises in the same way you create a predictable routine that has a soothing effect, even as the rest of your day may have so much other unpredictability.

Exercise that involves vigorous movement and an increased heart rate is a stress reducer because it relaxes the resting tension of muscles and tendons (by tensing and relaxing, which is the way muscles are required to work to execute any movement—one set tenses while the opposing set relaxes). Muscle and tendon relaxation (particularly when the exercise period is over) signals calm to the brain and interrupts the stress response.

Exercise also increases the production of neurotransmitters that inhibit activity in the stress center of the brain. During exercise, the body metabolizes tryptophan (an amino acid) to sustain physical exertion, and one of the byproducts of this is Serotonin, which quiets the stress response.

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Do your exercise with focus (don't check your phone or engage in other activities). Get your head into the experience. Count the repetitions, take timed rest periods, repeat exercises in sets, focus on your form and your movement. In this way, exercise creates a focused distraction. It's compelling. You have to pay attention to it, so it brings you into the present and away from your stressful thoughts. This is a mindfulness experience, a respite period for the brain.

Exercise is controlled movement with predictable body sensations. Controlled movement gives you a sense of control over your own body, whereas stress creates body sensations that seem unpredictable and out of your control. Taking back control over your body, even for short periods of time, can reset the stress response.

4) Engage in meditation. Meditation is the most well-known and best researched brain-body resetting exercise. Meditation takes training to have profound effects, but even without any formal training, people can learn to meditate and experience some benefit.

Meditation is the practice of bringing your awareness acutely into the present with a focus on your breathing, your thoughts, and how your body feels. Meditation instruction is beyond the scope of this article, but there are many resources people can use to learn the skill (e.g., [headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)). For those who already know how to meditate, we worry that the practice too easily gets put aside at a time when it is needed most. Put it into the schedule and make it a priority of the day.