

**Prepare Yourself for Your Return to School**

**Understand the Adverse Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic**

**Kevin Plummer, Ph.D.  
School Clinical & Consulting Services  
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## **Prepare Yourself for Your Return to School**

### **Understand the Adverse Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic**

Teaching during this pandemic has been an arduous challenge for so many reasons that could not have been fully anticipated, 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. Just like the front line medical staff, they have not given up, they have not turned away, they have not admitted defeat; they have continued to show up every day to give us their best, despite what it has been doing to them.

We must help these remarkable people take good care of themselves because many are struggling. The workload has been relentless, expectations about what they have been expected to accomplish have been sometimes wildly unrealistic, and success with students has been a never-ending and often less fruitful struggle. They have been working virtually alone, without the customary teamwork of their colleagues, and at the same time they have been over-exposed to the struggles in their students' homes, but they have not ever been able to leave work by going home themselves. So, here they are today, right where they were yesterday, problem solving, innovating, making it work, while at the same time, as they work in the presence of their own family, their children are a reminder that they are not doing enough for them. Despite a supreme effort, our teachers must end each day with a feeling like they're never doing enough. Still they show up every day on the front lines and give us their best.

The pandemic experience has already had a profound effect on educators personally, professionally and emotionally. We must give serious thought to the stress and the emotional impact that working under pandemic conditions has created for educators, because they will be returning to the school buildings in the fall and the job cannot be done well by people who are worn out, burdened by stress, scarred by trauma and filled with feelings of guilt, regret and inadequacy. We need to consider what we can do right now to better understand this and what can educators do right now to minimize the impact of stress, lessen their trauma impact, and feel more resolved as they prepare themselves to go back to school in the fall.

### **Determine Your Need for an Increased Emphasis on Wellness**

Use the list of factors below to begin to assess your own stress impact. For each item, try to assess how much you experience the stress associated with that factor. Keep in mind that under the current circumstances, it is normal to experience stress and it is normal for some of the factors to have a significant impact. This scoring is just to help you determine if you need to do more now to feel healthier and to ensure a better level of wellness as you prepare for your return to school in the fall. You may want to do more regardless of your score, but if many areas are in the range of 3 and 4, you should probably make a plan to prioritize your own wellness.

In addition to the factor ratings in the next section, review the checklist at the end of this article to see how many of these items describe how you feel. Everyone feels some of those things some of the time, but if these feelings are numerous or chronic, it's an indication that you need to do more to ensure the level of health and wellness necessary to do your job effectively now and when you return to work in the fall.

Understanding and Validating Why Educators Feel Stressed

**1) The workload has been relentless.** The workload has been relentless, because in addition to teaching and planning, it is so difficult to track down and engage some students. Teaching is hard enough when students are sitting in the classroom, but with distance learning it's as if the teachers are also driving the school bus to pick up the children, then helping them get dressed and ready for school, and then simultaneously counseling and coaching the parents about how to manage the school experience for their children. Then, when it's time to teach, it's a struggle to maintain student engagement while the home is full of distraction, and in some cases, immersed in its own stress and dysfunction. We have to also keep in mind that teachers not only had to learn about a new technology the day they needed to use it, but technology and other methods require constant upgrading. **It is no wonder that many teachers are feeling helpless and ineffective and exhausted.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**2) Home is a place of work, not a respite from work.** The work day is extended late into the afternoons and evenings because emails need to be checked for parent responses, online assignments can now be completed and checked any time of the day, and coordinating with other school personnel can happen any time of the day with emails and various ways to meet online. As long as the teacher has access to the computer, the work day finds a way to keep going and the computer can serve as a trigger that the teacher can do more still, to reach the level of effectiveness they're accustomed to. Home is usually considered a safe haven, a place people return to at the end of the work day to find comfort, a shift in priorities, and the distraction of family. This enables people to work a stressful job and then recover. With parents working from home, work cannot be escaped by going home (just as the normal stressors of home cannot be escaped by going to work). Home is a place of work, not a respite from work, not a sanctuary that enables recovery. **It is no wonder that many teachers chronically feel like there's no end to their work day and they're never doing enough.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**3) Neither role, parent or teacher is fulfilled to a satisfactory level.** It's tough to be a parent while you're working and tough to do any work while you're trying to be a parent. In most cases, teachers feel like they're not doing either one well enough. To make matters worse, there are no standards for how to do either. Teachers have well-established "internalized" work standards from years of teaching and these are the work standards, in their minds, that continue to define their sense of success at work, even though it is impossible to achieve customary levels of performance while working from home.

In the same way, parents have well-established standards of family functioning and these are the standards they use to define their expectations of good parenting and family functioning at home, even though the current circumstances are extraordinary and have no precedent. While

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teachers are teaching, they are in the presence of their own children who are going without the attention of their parents. The children don't fully understand this, so they continue to try to get their needs met from the parent who is right there, but teaching. **It is no wonder that many teachers are feeling chronically overwhelmed, guilty and inadequate in attempt to balance their roles as a teacher and parent.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**4) Teachers are shouldering the blame for limited student success.** Teachers are rewarded in their work because they are successful in helping students learn, but so many students are not learning nearly as much as they would in school, despite an extraordinary and relentless effort on the part of teachers. Naturally, teachers are getting discouraged, feeling burned out, and helpless. Many are shouldering the blame for limited student success and some may even be questioning their teaching abilities or their desire to teach. Furthermore, they are isolated from their colleagues, so they are less able to conduct a "reality check" or receive words of encouragement or validation or feel part of a supportive professional community. **It is no wonder that many teachers feel unrewarded and ineffective for their efforts and that they feel overly responsible for the lack of progress of some of their students.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**5) Expectations are sometimes unrealistic, ill-defined and continuously changing.** The expectations for educating students at home were invented the day that students started learning at home (and expectations continue to change). This has never been done before, teaching the entire student population online, so there are no established and validated expectations about what is realistic, what is possible and how to optimize the experience. Teachers had to build the plane while flying the plane. A clear defined and reasonably attainable standard of success is necessary in any line of work to prevent job burnout. The expectations teachers have been expected to meet have often been unrealistic, ill-defined, and constantly changing. That is no one's fault, but it is very stressful to operate under those conditions. It takes tremendous stamina and mental fitness to stay motivated and on track under those circumstances. **It is no wonder that many teachers are feeling discouraged, feeling like they can't meet expectations, and have lost hope.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**6) Teachers are witnessing so much that is emotionally upsetting.** Teachers are witnessing so much more that is occurring in the students' homes that they risk over exposure to the stress, the struggles, the hardship, and the emotionally upsetting circumstances their students and their student's families face. Ordinarily students leave their families (and the stress of the family)

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every day to attend school, so teachers are not routinely exposed. **It is no wonder that many teachers feel compassion fatigue, weighed down by the burdens of others.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

### **7) It's easy to feel diminished and less like a professional when you're in your own home.**

Going to work provides people with a different role and different responsibilities, a shift in scene. You can be important at work and valued and appreciated in ways that you can't achieve at home. At work you can be part of an entire network of people—a team of people—that appreciate you, support you, understand you and care about you. It's hard to feel like a professional when you're in your own home and it's easy to feel diminished if you are not in the culture and context of the school community. **It is no wonder that teachers feel isolated and unsupported at times, and that they sometimes struggle to stay in touch with their professional identity.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

**8) Substantial screen time can be disorienting.** With so much work conducted from home people are forced to spend so many more hours in front of a computer screen. 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 maybe even somewhat dissociative. Changes in scene, different people, different places, different surroundings, can reset the stress response. Normally, all day long we experience scene-shifting resetting experiences, but with work done exclusively on the computer and other electronic devices we are eliminating scene shifting as a reset experience and instead we are experience stress without the natural opportunity to continually put things in context. **It is no wonder that teachers feel disoriented and stressed after a day of teaching online.**

This work factor has had an adverse impact on me:

0	1	2	3	4
not at all	a little	moderately	considerably	extremely

In addition to the factor ratings above, review the checklist below to see how many of these items describe how you feel. Everyone feels some of these things some of the time, but if these feelings are numerous or chronic, it's an indication that you need to do more to ensure the level of health and wellness necessary to do your job effectively now and when you return to work in the fall.

Apathy toward work	Loss of meaning and purpose with work
Loss of pride in the work	Loss of interest in and investment in the work
Loss of motivation for work	Students are perceived as energy drains
Emotional exhaustion, emotional depletion, feeling drained	

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Pessimism, loss of hope	Shutting down ("I'm done")
Impatience	Insensitivity toward others
Diminished caring about the students	Cynicism ("what's the point of even trying")
Chronic irritability	Frequent complaining
Increase in sarcasm	Feeling dread about reporting to work
Frequent blaming	Failing to report for scheduled time with students
Chronically feeling helpless, hopeless	Frequently feeling overwhelmed
Unable to feel worthwhile at work	Easily annoyed by the needs or demands of others
Chronically feeling incompetent, ineffective, inadequate	
Poor concentration, forgetfulness	Increase in errors, decrease in productivity
Increased procrastination	Frequently distracted/preoccupied
Inability to complete tasks and assignments	
Difficulty making decisions or making poor decisions	
More easily startled	Frequently in a daydream, often leaving the present
Increased frustration and anger	Feeling heightened anxiety, nervousness, on edge
Inability to let go of work-related matters, rumination	
Intrusive thoughts and images about student emotional problems	
Sleep problems	

### Next Steps

There are many things you can do during the work day to mitigate the adverse impact of teaching during the pandemic. It is also important to realize that while your work right now can sometimes be impossible, it is not and should not be your whole life. While the demands of work can be unreasonable, you don't have to let that define you and consume you. 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 above to notice what teaching during the pandemic is doing to you and you can use the additional materials in this series 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. Refer to the article, [Mitigating the Adverse Emotional Impact of Teaching During the Pandemic](#) to help you design an approach to wellness that addresses your unique stress.