

Six Ways for Educators to Avoid Compassion Fatigue

It's easy to get overwhelmed by students' struggles. Here are some ways not to.

How Not to Burn Out When Working with Students with Trauma

Over 34 million children in the United States under the age of 18 have experienced at least one type of serious childhood trauma, according to the National Survey for Children's Health—and the numbers may be even higher, due to category omissions such as poverty and racism.

These stunning statistics are a heartbreaking reality for our children and a daily struggle for teachers. With nearly half of the children in our nation's classrooms experiencing adverse childhood events, trauma, or chronic trauma, teachers face the herculean feat of trying to reach children who simply do not feel safe enough to be reached, let alone ready to learn.

"[I have] all-consuming thoughts of my students, I feel fear and hopelessness almost every day. I feel burdened, guilty for feeling burdened, and often have a heavy heart."

With such an overwhelming number of children facing trauma, it can be easy for educators to lose hope or burn out. They, and others in caring professions, can face "vicarious trauma," more commonly known as compassion fatigue—the cumulative, detrimental effect of working with survivors of traumatic life events. Symptoms can include insomnia, substance abuse, inability to focus, memory impairment, anxiety, depression, isolation, chronic fatigue, and more. So how can educators protect themselves from the many possible

effects of vicarious trauma? Our [Center for Special Education's](#) Institute for Trauma Sensitivity (LIFTS) has some ideas.

1. Know what is yours to do.

Separate what you wish you could do from what you know you can do. You may feel that you are not doing enough—a sure way of developing stress and feeling overwhelmed. While you may not be able to prevent trauma or remove suffering children from their situations, you can do your job to the best of your ability, with love and compassion for both the students and yourself. Focus on the task at hand and be fully present for your students. You might begin the day by setting an intention such as, "Today my intention is to do my part in fostering a safe environment for my students..." And once your intention is set...

2. Let go of the result.

This is not to say that you stop caring about the efficacy of your teaching, connecting with students, or community building, it is to say that you can practice being less attached to exactly how you think things should look. When we loosen the grip on our ideas about the way things should be, we are much more open to new ideas and new ways of looking at things. Acknowledge the brain's desire for control with humor and compassion, and you create more space to find creative solutions.

3. Develop a self-care strategy.

Creating a strategy for taking care of yourself is a necessary step in avoiding compassion fatigue. Some ideas:

- Spend quiet time alone to get centered and recount things that bring you joy and make you feel engaged with the world around you.
- Integrate small steps toward wellness into your daily routine, such as

eating better, getting outside, exercising, dancing, singing, or drawing.

- Learn how to say no. There is a big difference between being dependable and *always* saying yes. Choosing to live in alignment with your own values, goals, mission and passion makes it easy to know when to say "yes" and when to say "no, thank you," alleviating resentment and allowing life to unfold more harmoniously.

4. Create a strong network.

In our competitive culture, it is easy to develop a sense that we have to go it alone. However, we are hardwired for connection and interdependence; it really does take a village. Build a professional community of trusted colleagues with whom you can share your vision, fears, hopes and successes. Look for allies to help in difficult situations—a maintenance specialist, office administrator, or the teacher next door might connect with a student who gives you the cold shoulder. Such relationships not only support *you*, they can help students build trust and confidence.

5. Be authentic.

In her book "*The Gifts of Imperfection*," author Brené Brown writes: "Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are. [It] is a collection of choices that we have to make every day to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen." Showing up as your truest self is an invaluable gift to your students. In meeting ourselves where we are, we give students permission to meet themselves where they are.

6. Practice mindfulness.

The physical and emotional benefits of mindfulness, or focusing one's attention on the present moment and accepting what is rather than what should be, are many. Where chronic stress can shrink essential brain

structures, practice of mindfulness meditation can increase the mass of those same structures, leading to benefits such as improved memory and focus, better sleep, lower blood pressure, and reduced anxiety and depression. Even when practiced for just a few minutes every day, mindfulness meditation can lead to increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, greater empathy, closer connections, and an overall sense of well-being.

More importantly, mindfulness can provide a new perspective. Rather than identifying with a continual stream of thoughts, we identify with a deeper sense of awareness. This, in turn, can lead to an experience of compassion as an endless, rather than exhaustive, resource—toward yourself, your colleagues, and your students.

Read more about [How to Be Mindful](#).

Trauma & Learning Resources

[Helping Traumatized Children Learn](#), by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative

The report summarizes the research on how child development is affected by trauma, noting the varied consequences for academic performance as well as social and emotional functioning. This book identifies the need for school-wide ecological supports (Trauma Sensitive Schools) as the basis for student success.

[Helping Traumatized Children Learn Volume II](#)

This report articulates the process for encouraging development of Trauma Sensitive Schools, through the creation of Learning Organizations within schools that follow an effective change process using an inquiry based methodology. A policy agenda calls for changes in laws and policies to support schools.

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