

When Teachers Experience Empathic Distress

Mindfulness and compassion are effective self-care strategies for teachers who work with students who routinely experience trauma.

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Teacher Wellness



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In my years teaching in urban public schools, I saw many students experience extreme stress from living in poverty and also in gang-affiliated neighborhoods. The children I taught had frequent food and housing

insecurity, and were exposed to multiple forms of violence—on the streets, at school, and in their homes. As [The Atlantic reports](#), location, income level, and race can determine how often children experience crisis and violence.

Teachers, particularly those working in schools located in communities with high poverty, often find themselves overburdened and under-resourced to help their students (and their students' families) who are experiencing routine and extreme trauma.

Defining Empathic Distress

I first heard the term *empathic distress* from Dr. Joan Halifax, an anthropologist, educator, and pioneer in the field of end-of-life care. She uses the term to describe what happens when someone is exposed repeatedly to the trauma of others. In terms of those who work in service professions like emergency medicine, teaching, and hospice care, Halifax finds it more accurate than *compassion fatigue*. And I agree—the term struck a deep chord in me when I first heard it. “Yes,” I remember thinking, “that’s it.”

Most weekends I was able to put all that I knew about my students' lives on hold, be with friends and family, and relax. But then there were Saturdays that would go into Sundays when I couldn't shake a foreboding, nagging feeling of despair. I couldn't stop thinking, for instance, about the 16-year-old student in my fifth period class who shared with me that she was by far in the best group home she'd been in but that her belongings were constantly being stolen by other girls.

For teachers, that feeling of deep empathy for a student, coupled with knowing that you've done all you can do—and the child is still perhaps still suffering—can cause considerable distress.

First and foremost, we need to come to an understanding and a place of acceptance that we have a limited area of influence and reach when it comes to the healing journey of our students who have trauma. We can't save

anyone but ourselves. We know this. But that helplessness that teachers feel, that is not a sort of fatigue—it's distress. So how do we address that distress?

Relieving Our Empathic Distress

There are commonsense things we know that we can do to ease our anxiety and stress: take a walk, a bath, an exercise class. And what I have found especially helpful with empathic distress is tending to my body, yes, but also to my mind. Sometimes my brain just refuses to calm down. The best way I have found to do this is through contemplative practices—using both mindfulness and compassion practice.

By taking images of brains of those who routinely engage in [contemplative practices](#), neuroscientist Richard Davison discovered that “their mental practice is having an effect on the brain in the same way golf or tennis practice will enhance performance. It demonstrates that the brain is capable of being trained and physically modified in ways few people can imagine. Buddhist monks have known for centuries that meditation can change the mind.”

The Practice of Mindfulness

So our brains can change course from erratic, obsessive thinking that is distracting, exhausting, and distressing. Through the practice of mindfulness we can find ourselves more grounded in our bodies and in the present moment.

What does mindfulness practice look like?

Begin by being seated, standing (eyes opened softly or closed), or walking slowly, and then count each breath—each in and out breath equals one breath. Breathe smoothly and calmly and try to keep your mind just on the breath. When thoughts arrive, don't analyze them, simply name them “thinking,” and keep counting each breath.

This is just one example for practicing mindfulness. There are many others, and the range of time is up to you (two minutes, eight minutes, etc.). A goal of the practice of mindfulness is to disrupt thinking of the future and the past, keeping one more in the present moment. The results can be quite calming.

More and more educators are practicing mindfulness, adding it to their personal self-care repertoire, and also bringing it into their classrooms.

But do many of us know that mindfulness practice has an important partner?

The Practice of Compassion

The goal of the practice of compassion is to nurture kindness, compassion, and love, for oneself and for others. Cultivating this compassion and good will in our lives can serve as a salve for feelings such as empathic distress.

What does compassion practice look like? Similar to mindfulness, you can be seated, standing (eyes opened softly or closed), or walking slowly, and then one way you can practice it is by repeating to yourself (how many times, and for how minutes is up to you) the phrase, “May I be safe, may I be healthy, may I be happy, may I be at ease.”

You can simply stay with just the phrase for yourself, or you can move to the next phrase, imagining someone you would like to wish well who is struggling or in pain—a student, a family member, a colleague. Then repeat the following phrase, “May you be safe, may you be healthy, may you be happy, may you be at ease.”

Next, move to thinking about a group whom you are connected with—a classroom full of your students or your family—and repeat the phrase, “May we be safe, may we be healthy, may we be happy, may we be at ease.”

In a study, those who engaged in the practice of compassion for seven weeks [reported a noticeable difference emotionally](#)—an increase in gratitude,

contentment, hope, and joy, and a decrease in anxiety and stress. (You can also try [an audio-guided practice](#) for compassion.)

Perception Shift

As teachers working in difficult and challenging settings, the way to survive and thrive isn't just about taking action for ourselves (going to an exercise class, say) or our students (staying after school to listen and comfort, or advocating for additional counseling services). I propose that it also requires we spend time routinely going within and tending to our own distress with intentional care and compassion.