

Finding Pockets of Mindful Moments Amidst the Busyness

Educators give everything to their schools and classrooms, and in doing so can reach the brink of burnout. Learn how mindful self-care is a simple, yet powerful sustaining practice for Danielle, who taught in public schools for seventeen years. Get tips on how to start weaving pockets of mindful moments into your day and three classroom activities to introduce mindfulness to your students.



When I started teaching, I gave everything to my job and ended up almost leaving the profession within the first few years. This phenomenon of young teachers starting as bright burning flames only to fizzle and fry within the first few years is increasingly commonplace. And even if those young

teachers hang on, a recent study showed that 61% of teachers reported that their work is "always" or "often" stressful.¹

Throughout those early years, the concept of teacher stress and burnout were completely common, normal, and accepted. And clearly not much has changed. Another recent study found that an alarming 93% of elementary school teachers surveyed reported experiencing high levels of stress.²

When I looked around at which teachers came back year after year, it seemed to me that only the strong survived; and I didn't really know if I was strong enough. I definitely didn't know if I would survive. And honestly, if I continued feeling the way I was feeling, I didn't know if I wanted to continue teaching.

Article continues below



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Dabbling in self-care

I started hearing about the importance of self-care and putting myself first. At first it felt selfish, but I was desperate and didn't know what else to do.

So I dove in and scheduled lots of “me time” – I treated myself with my favorite meal at the end of a busy week, I bought myself something new, I even scheduled a massage. But week after week, it didn’t stop me from feeling like I was white knuckling my stress and overwhelm to simply get to the finish line of Friday afternoon.

Although I was practicing some self-care, nothing was really changing in my day-to-day workload, I simply had a few more things to look forward to. Don’t get me wrong, these rewards were great, but they didn’t make my job more satisfying or lessen my overall school stress. In fact, some of those “treats” actually started to stress me out as “one more thing” to do at the end of my week.

I quickly realized that “treating myself” wasn’t at the root of self-care that I needed. Teaching wasn’t going to become less busy, the demands of the job weren’t going to dissipate, and no one else was going to rescue me and make my job less demanding.

I knew that if I wanted to continue teaching for the long haul, I needed a self-care solution that would help me in the midst of my busyness.

Finding pockets of mindful moments

I had to figure out something simple that worked for me and my schedule. I started to identify consistent pockets of time where I could “sneak in” some self-care to my daily routine – what I started to call my pockets of mindful moments.

Identifying these pockets of mindful moments was a complete game changer in so many ways. I no longer just “got through” my days and weeks. Because I had little “recharging stations” built into my day, I knew there would be times for fill ups throughout the week instead of just when I made an appointment or on the weekend.

My perception of self-care changed completely once I saw how beneficial finding these pockets of mindful moments were to my own health and well-being. I still love “treating” myself when I can, but that kind of self-care wasn’t what I needed to truly make a change – in the way I was feeling in my classroom, day in and day out. What I needed was a way to build self-care into my already busy schedule through finding pockets of mindful moments.

You can start creating pockets of mindful moments in your day, right now

We can happen upon pockets of mindful moments anywhere in our schedules, but I’ve found it helpful to start with an intention to create them purposefully and consistently. Here is a sample daily schedule of how you can build pockets of mindful moments into your day relatively seamlessly:

1) Start your morning with some QUIET TIME

Take five minutes to just sit, listen to music, focus on your breathing, or anything else that can help clear your head for five minutes before you officially start your day. This can help you start your day with focus and ease. Finding these five minutes can be as easy as locking the bathroom door so that no one else bothers you, or sitting in your favorite chair before everyone else in the house wakes up.

2) Before going into school, create an INTENTION

Write down an intention for your day. This can be a focus area, a value, or a general direction to care for yourself while you are moving throughout the day’s demands. It’s helpful to keep this intention somewhere that you can refer to it, so that you can check in periodically. Try writing it on a post-it note.

Here are some sample intentions to get you started...

- *Take a mindful breath every time I enter my classroom or office*

- *Take a few moments to stretch before grading papers*
- *Carry less weight in my bag*
- *Try to notice when my body tense and take three deep breaths*

3) At the end of your school day, practice REFLECTION

Try five minutes of writing or a simple mental check in. What went well? Try to name one thing that was positive. What would you change? End each reflection with naming or writing down something you are grateful for in your day. One word of caution for the perfectionists among us... try to practice a little self-compassion and avoid being overly critical during this reflection practice.

4) Between school and home, create time for TRANSITION

Before heading home, create a transition to give yourself a clear distinction between home and work. Too often work bleeds into our home lives and that is when we never feel like we get to refuel. So take a walk, do a five minute quiet time practice, get a cup of coffee, drive a new way home, do something that gives yourself a few minutes to refuel, refocus, and get ready for the next part of your day.

How to create pockets of mindful moments with your students:

Teachers aren't the only ones who can use pockets of mindful moments; our students benefit from these as well. And as a bonus, when we do these with our students, we also get a few more opportunities to refuel our tanks throughout our day.

1) Try a Silent Sixty

This can be a helpful way to start class or to transition between activities. Set a timer and allow students to just be. They don't have to "practice mindfulness," they can simply sit quietly for a minute. 60 seconds can seem

like a long time if this is new to students. You can adapt this practice by challenging students to pick one of the senses, e.g., hearing or seeing, and ask them what they noticed during the silent time.

2) Take Three Breaths

There are many ways to introduce and adapt age-appropriate breathing exercises.

Hot cocoa breaths: smell the hot cocoa (breathe in), cool the hot cocoa (breathe out).

Balloon breaths: breathe in and make the balloon bigger, then breathe out and make the balloon shrink.

You'll be surprised how students use it when they need it, suggest it to friends, or even ask for the whole class to practice.

3) Make One Minute for Good

Ask students to pause and think about all of the things they are grateful for or all of the things that bring them happiness. You can have them formally write these things down and share them or just think about them.

Hopefully by finding these pockets of mindful moments, you and your students will begin to refuel throughout your days and weeks, instead of running on empty and just hoping to make it to Friday's finish line.

Remember that self-care is not selfish and does not need to be difficult or grandiose. The pockets of mindful moments were the building blocks I needed to make teaching not just sustainable, but more fulfilling. With simple acts of self-care and self-compassion, moment-by-moment, day after day, I realized I was strong enough to thrive in this work. I became the teacher that I wanted to be.

Danielle Nuhfer, M.Ed. is the founder of [Teaching Well](#) which supports and

empowers teachers to increase well-being and self-care while reducing stress and burnout through teacher wellness coaching, online courses, and professional development programs. A [Certified Mindful Schools Instructor](#) and public school educator for seventeen years, Danielle has worked with thousands of teachers and students. To find out more about Teaching Well check out www.teachingwell.life or contact her at danielle@teachingwell.life.

Sources:

American Federation of Teachers. "[2017 Quality of Life Survey.](#)"

Walker, Tim. "[How Many Teachers Are Highly Stressed? Maybe More Than People Think.](#)" NEA.

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