

Five Ways Mindfulness Can Support Educators During a Crisis

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We are all grappling with an unprecedented environment these days.

As we search for ways to navigate this often-challenging new context, it's been encouraging to see that professionals across the early childhood field are increasingly exploring mindfulness as a tool to do just that.

There's been a surge in colleagues attending our now-daily mindfulness breaks at [ZERO TO THREE](#) (ZTT), a nonprofit that promotes the development and well-being of babies and toddlers, and where I serve as project director of mindfulness in early childhood. Almost 500 people tuned in to our first live-streamed Mindfulness Break, a new [weekly series](#) we are offering to promote self-care among early childhood educators.

Even before the coronavirus crisis, the well-being of the early childhood workforce was a concern. [A recent study](#)

indicates that the early childhood workforce is “in need of health promotion interventions to address high levels of mental and physical health challenges, some above and beyond peers with comparable demographic characteristics.”

The current COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt deepened these concerns. ZERO TO THREE recently released a [policy resource](#), “Considerations for Infants and Toddlers in Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers,” which reminds us that the early childhood workforce [provides an essential service](#)—one that puts these educators and their families at increased health and safety risk.

Contemplative practices have always helped us through times of need. They’ve been available—and effective—to educators since long before this global pandemic began. It’s widely accepted that mindfulness practices help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety in humans, and they’ve been shown to decrease depression and help those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Studies suggest mindfulness practices also [increase compassion](#) and our connection with others. And, when it comes to ourselves, we are learning more and more that being self-compassionate increases our motivation and positive emotions. ZERO TO THREE’s 2018 [literature review](#), “How Can Mindfulness Support Parenting and Caregiving?”

determined that mindfulness is a promising approach for enhancing both parents' and teachers' capacity to support their own well-being and to provide nurturing care to children.

There are many different types of contemplative practice, from mind-body practices like breathing techniques, yoga and mindful eating, to stillness practices like silent meditation and centering prayer. There is something for everyone to try. In these days when we all truly need to feel supported and connected, I encourage educators to explore mindfulness and see how it might support them.

Here are five easy ways to start:

- **Tune in to your body.** Take a few deep breaths into your belly and focus your attention on the feeling of your feet grounded on the floor, or the chair supporting you. Pay attention to the physical feeling of being supported. Notice all the places your body is touching the floor or chair, and how you are being held and supported. You might even imagine the whole planet is under your feet holding you up. Take another few deep breaths before you move on.
- **Focus on good feelings.** When you are in a moment of feeling connected to your family or have a special interaction with a child you work with, pay close attention to how that feels in your body. Notice where

in your body you feel contentment, gratitude and love. Take a moment to savor and appreciate those feelings. You can say to yourself, "This is what well-being feels like."

- **Make physical contact.** Spend a full minute hugging or cuddling a child, a pet or someone close to you (while still practicing social distancing with those outside your isolation group). Settle in and be present with the physical experience of touch and comfort. Notice if any areas of your body, and which areas, relax as you do this. Especially during this time when we may be physically distant from many people, long hugs and tuning in to touch with another being is calming, soothing and can generate feelings of warmth and love.
- **Imagine someone who gives you comfort.** Think of a family member, teacher, mentor or friend. Imagine they are right there with you, offering a warm smile, sending you wishes for well-being. Feel that person's presence, their care and love for you. Spend a few minutes with that feeling of comfort and love.
- **Connect with nature.** Take time for a walk outside, digging in the garden or even looking out your window or at photos of nature. Pay close attention to the colors, textures, smells and sounds. Explore and see if you can find something you have never noticed before—the smell of the air after it rains, or the many different shades of green as you walk through the park.

[Research](#) has shown that spending time in nature is good for our physical and mental well-being.

Whichever approach you choose, start small. You don't need to spend a lot of time, just 5-10 minutes each day to begin. Remembering to take this time for ourselves is usually the hardest part. Make it a routine—try scheduling it for the same time each day, like during your morning dog walk or every night before dinner, to make it easier to remember.

What makes an activity mindful is that we do it with an attitude of curiosity and kindness, and pay attention to how we are feeling as we are doing it. What we notice through these practices can help us find calm and a sense of well-being, which as a result helps to “refill our tank” and makes it easier to offer the same quality of attuned, responsive and compassionate care to the children and families in our lives.