

Teachers Are Anxious and Overwhelmed. They Need SEL Now More Than Ever.

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At the end of March, our team at the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#), along with our colleagues at the [Collaborative for Social Emotional and Academic Learning](#), known as CASEL, launched a [survey](#) to unpack the emotional lives of teachers during the COVID-19 crisis.

In the span of just three days, over 5,000 U.S. teachers responded to the survey. We asked them to describe, in their own words, the three most frequent emotions they felt each day.

The five most-mentioned feelings among all teachers were: *anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed* and *sad*. Anxiety, by far, was the most frequently mentioned emotion.

The reasons educators gave for these stress-related feelings could be divided into two buckets. The first is mostly personal, including a general fear that they or someone in their family would contract COVID-19, the new coronavirus. The second pertains to their stress around

managing their own and their families' needs while simultaneously working full-time from home and adapting to new technologies for teaching.

Once distance learning had gone into effect, we heard from one educator who shared:

"My vision of finally having someone else take care of my own kids' education, even virtually, was smashed to smithereens. This requires 100% parent involvement, actually 200% because my kids are in two different grades!"

Given the unexpected new demands our educators are facing, we might assume that how teachers are feeling now is entirely different from the emotions they were experiencing before the pandemic. But is it?

In 2017, our center conducted a similar survey on teachers' emotions. A national sample of over 5,000 educators answered the same questions about how they were feeling.

Back then, the top five emotions were: *frustrated*, *overwhelmed*, *stressed*, *tired* and *happy*. The primary source of their frustration and stress pertained to not feeling supported by their administration around challenges related to meeting all of their students' learning needs, high-stakes testing, an ever-changing curriculum and work/life balance.

Our research findings are echoed across a growing body of

research on teachers' stress and burnout.

In one [study](#), 85 percent of teachers reported that work-life imbalance was affecting their ability to teach. Other [research](#) has shown that at least 30 percent of teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. Like our research, these studies found that the general causes of teacher stress and burnout are related to a lack of strong leadership and a negative climate, as well as increased job demands, especially around testing, addressing challenging student behaviors, a lack of autonomy and decision-making power, and limited-to-no training in social and emotional learning (SEL) to support educators' and students' emotional needs.

So, before the pandemic, America's teachers were already burning out. Add in new expectations of becoming distance learning experts to support uninterrupted learning for all their students and caring for the ever-evolving demands of their families, and it's no surprise that 95 percent of the feelings they reported recently are rooted in anxiety.

We can't control what is happening to us and around us, but we can control how we respond to it.

Emotions Matter

An anonymous teacher who filled out our most recent

survey described the balancing act like this:

“There is this huge dissonance right now between the messages such as ‘be well’ and ‘take care of yourself’ at the end of emails, and ‘in this time of uncertainty.’ Yet we have to partake in multiple seminars, read links related to online instruction, legal requirements in special ed, due process, timelines, etc. Everyone needs to be reminded again about how the brain works.”

At the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, we study how emotions drive effective teaching and learning, the decisions educators make, classroom and school climate, and educator well-being. We assert that educators’ emotions matter for five primary reasons:

- **Emotions matter for attention, memory and learning.** Positive emotions like joy and curiosity harness attention and promote greater engagement. Emotions like anxiety and fear, especially when prolonged, disrupt concentration and interfere with thinking. Chronic stress, especially when poorly managed, can result in the persistent activation of the sympathetic nervous system and the release of stress hormones like cortisol. Prolonged release of this and other neurochemicals impacts brain structures associated with executive functioning and memory, diminishing our ability to be effective educators and undermining student learning.
- **Emotions matter for decision-making.** When we’re

overwhelmed and feeling scared and stressed, the areas of our brains responsible for wise decision-making also can become “hijacked.” In contrast, the experience of more positive states like joy and interest tend to help people evaluate individuals, places and events more favorably compared to people experiencing more unpleasant emotions. Pleasant emotions also have been shown to enhance mental flexibility and creativity, which are key to navigating the novel and evolving demands of living through a pandemic.

- **Emotions matter for relationships.** How we feel and how we interpret the feelings of others sends signals for other people to either approach or avoid us. Teachers who express anxiety or frustration (e.g. in their facial expressions, body language, vocal tone or behavior) are likely to alienate students, which can impact students’ sense of safety in the classroom—and likely at home in a virtual learning environment—thereby having a negative influence on learning. Further, dysregulated emotions can undermine healthy relationships between teachers and parents. For most students, a successful distance learning experience will require a solid partnership between teachers and families.
- **Emotions matter for health and well-being.** How we feel influences our bodies, including physical and

mental health. Stress is associated with increased levels of cortisol, which has been shown to lead to both physical and mental health challenges, including depression and weight gain. Both the ability to regulate unpleasant emotions and the experience of more pleasant emotions have been shown to have health benefits, including fostering greater resilience during and after traumatic events.

- **Emotions matter for performance.** Chronic stress among teachers is linked to decreases in teacher motivation and engagement, both of which lead to burnout. Teachers who are burnt out have poorer relationships with students and are also less likely to be positive role models for healthy self-regulation—for their students and their families. It's no surprise that teachers who are burnt out are more likely to leave the profession, which impacts student learning and puts a huge drain on schools.

You get the picture: When educators answer the question about how they feel at school—or, in our most recent study, as an at-home educator—we learn they spend a big part of their workday in a pretty dark place.

[Research](#) we and others have conducted has shown two possible protective factors for teachers' emotional well-being. First, teachers with more developed emotion skills

tend to report less burnout and greater job satisfaction. These skills include the ability to recognize emotions accurately, understand their causes and consequences, label them precisely, express them comfortably and regulate them effectively. But the challenge is that most teachers have not received a formal education in emotion skills.

Second, teachers who work in a school with an administrator with more developed emotion skills tend to experience fewer negative emotions and more positive emotions. These teachers also are likely to have better-quality relationships with their students. When students have stronger connections with their teachers, they, in turn, are more engaged and committed to learning; they're also more willing to take risks and persist in the face of difficulty.

We need a greater focus on teachers' health and well-being now, so they can thrive through this pandemic and be psychologically ready to return to school after this has passed.

Supporting Educators' Well-Being

We know how anxious teachers (and, really, everyone else) are feeling right now. But have we thought about how we *want* to feel?

Previously, we asked teachers how they *want* to feel at school, and they've answered loud and clear. A few of the top hoped-for emotions were: *happy, inspired, valued, supported, effective* and *respected*.

The more sensitive we can be to our educators' emotional needs today, the better we'll be able to support them now and when schools reopen. The space between how we feel and how we want to feel presents an opportunity to work together to improve the emotional climate of our homes and schools. The emotional climate is the feelings and emotions a learning space evokes; that space includes both the physical one and the learning climate that is evoked through the interactions between and among educators and students. This can be applied to traditional school settings and to a virtual one.

We need to understand how our teachers *want* to feel, again, and then support them with what they'll need to experience these feelings.

In the same survey we conducted at the end of March, we asked teachers to share some reflections about what they need to have greater emotional balance. Responses included time to adjust to the new normal of online learning and ways to make virtual learning fun and engaging. Teachers also expressed a strong need for honesty, respect, kindness, flexibility and patience from their school

administrators. Further, they requested more realistic expectations, including boundaries around working around the clock. Among the top requests were strategies to support their own and their students' wellness and resilience.

Building a Charter

Putting our emotional needs in writing has a way of making them real for everyone. It acts as a reminder for those times when we might feel anxious or frustrated or any other uncomfortable feeling. It also serves as a contract between ourselves and our colleagues (and even students and families) to help during moments when we are anything but calm and considerate.

As part of [RULER](#), our center's approach to SEL, thousands of schools across the nation have gone through the process of creating an "Emotional Intelligence Charter" with their faculty and staff with positive results.

The process of building a charter or agreement requires us to be vulnerable, and that can be hard, especially in times like these. And some educators are somewhat self-conscious and apprehensive about the process of asking colleagues how they want to feel. It can be scary. Often, how we want to feel is an indicator of what hasn't been working at our schools. But we've found that when schools

have the courage to ask, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Specifically, a charter reflects the agreed-upon feelings and behaviors of the members of a learning community. Here, we describe the process of building a faculty and staff charter. The same process can be applied to the classroom or home environment.

It starts with a deceptively simple question: *How do we want to feel as a faculty/staff?* A principal or group of teachers can pose the question to the faculty and staff at their school. Once everyone shares their top three or four hoped-for feelings, the goal is to narrow them all down to a "top five" list reflective of the entire faculty.

The second question is: *What do we need to do for everyone to feel this way?* Here, faculty and staff share specific ideas that would support them in experiencing each of the feelings. The goal is to come up with two or three observable behaviors that are realistic and attainable for each feeling. For example, in order for teachers to feel supported around distance learning, what exactly will everyone agree to do differently so everyone feels supported? If teachers want to feel more valued, what are the specific things schools can do? Perhaps everyone can agree to respond to virtual inquiries in a timely manner.

Once the five feelings and related behaviors are compiled,

the charter can be created and distributed to each member of the faculty and staff. In this virtual world of education, be creative about ways to disseminate it to everyone. If your school or district uses a learning management system, perhaps the charter can be “public” there.

Importantly, the charter should be a living document—it will evolve as your learning community does throughout the pandemic. Consider weekly reflections and opportunities for teachers to share ideas based on their hoped-for feelings. For example, if teachers want to feel more engaged, perhaps create opportunities for them to share their best virtual lesson of the week and why it worked so well. Even weekly quotations that remind everyone about the desired feelings can help to sustain a positive climate. And when we are all finally able to return to our schools, it will be important to revisit the charter. How we want to feel and what we need to support our health and well-being is fluid.

We are living through a pandemic that most of us could never have imagined. And, as we’ve shared, our educators are not in the best emotional shape. Today’s teachers, counselors and school leaders are experiencing greater anxiety, stress and burnout than ever before. If we just hope for the best, more and more educators will fall by the wayside. Fortunately, an increasing number of schools are seeing the benefits of SEL, not just for students, but for

educators' own skill development.

The time has come for *all* schools to address the missing link in what will help educators' thrive—a greater focus on *all* adults' health and well-being. If we want our educators to be successful—both personally and professionally—schools must be places that bring out the best in them.

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