

Teaching Is as Stressful as an ER. These Calming Strategies Can Help.

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There is something going on in the back of the room. Two students are fighting over a piece of paper. The paper rips. Shouting begins. All of your students suddenly turn their attention to the back and you feel out of control. There's just five minutes left and you still have to cover one more important point in your lesson.

In this scenario, many teachers may have a similar response to Sandy, a teacher who faced this scenario during a workshop for a research project. “I would elevate to their level in an instant; just like that,” she says. “I would become totally angry, unable to make a good thoughtful decision about how to react.”

Now, consider some other types of responses [that educators offer](#) in these stressful moments.

Gabrielle “pulls her anger in and lets the emotional elevator go down.” Kasey “stops, grounds herself, and lets out deep breaths.” And Nadia “takes a step back, calms herself, and re-approaches the situation with a thoughtful response rather than an immediate reaction.” Through their composed approaches, these teachers help maintain a supportive learning environment for our nation's students.

While these solutions seem simple in reflection, in the moment they can be a real challenge, especially if you work in a classroom environment, which

researchers from Penn State say can be as [stress-inducing as an emergency room](#). Teachers enter such an environment every day, which sometimes feels like life-or-death. The teaching profession doesn't just begin and end during class time. It's increasingly defined by unrealistic expectations; extensive meetings and other instructional demands; and difficult conversations with principals, administrators and parents. While we must address the contextual issues that overburden our educators, we must also take the steps to build their resilience.

That is why, after a long career spent in education, I co-created the nonprofit program [Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education](#) (CARE) more than a decade ago, equipping Gabrielle, Sandy, Kasey, Nadia and a growing number of educators across the country with the expertise, resources and time to perfect those solutions.

When we think of effective professional development in America's schools, we often hear of the need for sustained training, subject and grade-specific materials, and opportunities for active learning. While these are all essential, missing from this picture are the activities and strategies that our teachers need to effectively address those highly stressful moments.

They need dedicated spaces to practice the art of listening with fellow teachers—and pick up the tools to navigate those discussions. They need time after the school day to learn how to make the most of mindfulness in response to any number of stressors. And they need safe spaces in which they recognize and confront those issues alongside facilitators and peers.

I knew we needed to expand the scope of professional development so that educators can further develop their self-awareness, compassion, reflection and self-presence. These are the inner resources they need to help all students flourish socially, emotionally and academically— especially as more and

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stress

In fact, [half of the students in schools across America](#) have experienced some form of trauma, violence or chronic stress. They face food and financial insecurity, precipitated by economic inequality. They are exposed to parents or guardians' substance abuse and behavioral health issues, sometimes linked to the opioid crisis that too many of our communities grapple with. And, increasingly, they are left without a stable home.

In the face of these challenges, it falls increasingly to our educators to provide the supports that our young people need. And for teachers to assume this responsibility, they need to not only be regulated, calm, and grounded, but also learn to be powerfully present and emotionally responsive in their classrooms.

Educators who work with CARE engage in mindfulness training, emotional skill-building exercises and listening activities that prepare them to serve their students. They practice listening to one another about their experiences with parents and students. They engage in role-plays involving classic stressors: a student who lashes out, a difficult parent or yet another impossible timeline to meet. Through these activities, they learn to bring mindful awareness to their classroom interactions so they can respond, rather than react in the moment.

And the research backs this type of work, most recently through a [large-scale, randomized study of CARE's impact](#) across 36 high-poverty schools in New York City, involving 224 educators (and, in turn, over 5,000 students). After collecting data on those educators' well-being, observations of classrooms and student behavioral reports over the course of a year, we found that teachers who received emotional regulation training were more emotionally supportive, demonstrated greater sensitivity to student needs, and provided more positive and productive classroom environments. Furthermore, when assessing teachers' stress levels, those teachers noted considerably less

distress, and an improved ability to manage their emotions.

Perhaps as significantly, the students in participating classrooms became more engaged in learning. And those with poor social skills even demonstrated considerable gains in motivation and reading.

We can now say that when our educators have opportunities across the school year to practice the arts of mindfulness, listening and emotional management, they can better navigate any number of stressors they face in a given day.

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And I say this from personal experience. In teaching classroom management for 15 years, one observation stands above all others: educators don't perform well when they are frustrated or anxious. They over-appraise students' outbursts or issues in the classroom as intentional and personal, ultimately just fueling problematic situations.

Meanwhile, after practicing mindfulness for more than 20 years, I saw the benefits of the alternative. In the face of stressful situations, I instead used techniques like deep breathing and mindful walking to calm my body and mind, gaining that heightened self-awareness to thoughtfully respond to the issue at hand. While we may not be able to change the fact that teaching is as stressful as emergency surgery, these techniques can make the job far more manageable.

Just imagine if educators had the resources to calmly appraise difficult situations, empathize with their students' plights, and constructively work together to develop solutions that addressed those challenges.

The difference: less stressed teachers, more engaged students and classroom

environments that effectively support the millions of students in America exposed to trauma.