

Secondary Trauma Stress

Our classrooms are not the idyllic examples we might have envisioned when we considered becoming teachers: Happy students eagerly working on the amazing activities we provide for them or listening attentively to our fascinating presentations. We get students who have experienced abuse, homelessness, poverty, gang violence, addiction, and more. They might share some of that with us, and that helps us understand why they are having problems concentrating, getting their work done, coming to class, or behaving well.

Hearing the trauma can leave us with an emotional weight, called secondary trauma stress. The symptoms include: “anger, cynicism, anxiousness, avoidance, chronic exhaustion, disconnection, fear, guilt, hopelessness, hypervigilance, inability to listen, loss of creativity, poor boundaries, poor self-care, and sleeplessness.” (edutopia secondary traumatic stress)

One way you can assess yourself and your feelings is by taking the Professional Quality of Life survey. It measures “Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue.” There is a copy of the survey at the end of this section, or you can visit their website and download the PDF. (proqol pdf)

Here are some techniques to use as part of your self-care, especially if you are experiencing secondary trauma stress:

- 1. Connect with quality friends:** Every Thursday morning at 5:30, I show up in a music teacher’s driveway for a 50-minute “walk & talk.” Eddie and I always discuss teaching problems. Besides being a good listener, my friend reminds me that my feelings matter, and that I’m enough. Regardless of my difficulties, I end the walk feeling emotionally recharged.
- 2. Write it out:** Teaching requires mental and emotional dexterity. When one is weakened, the other is compromised. But writing can help. According to one study, expressive writing (describing feelings) “‘offloads’ worries from working memory, therefore relieving the distracting effects of worry on cognition.” Set a timer for eight minutes and let it all out on paper.
- 3. Use drive time for self-talk:** If I’m feeling out of sorts while driving to work, I talk about my concerns aloud and in the third person. For example: “Todd is feeling raw and fragile because of the crying jag that X had yesterday. He’ll be OK today if he doesn’t get overpowered by X’s feelings.” This emotional distancing, according to research on third-person self-talk, boosts rationality and improves people’s “ability to control their thoughts, feelings, and behavior under stress.” After that, I put Aloe Blacc’s “The Man” on full blast and float into my classroom.
- 4. Avoid toxic colleagues:** Research shows that toxic co-workers 1) are selfish, 2) display overconfidence, and 3) are found to declare “emphatically that the rules should always be followed no matter what.” If a toxic co-worker hangs out in the break room, eat elsewhere with colleagues who smile with their eyes.

5. Do something tangible: To avoid marinating in diminished compassion, recharge by completing a small task—something specific and concrete. Run on an elliptical machine for 30 minutes or send a card to a friend. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, authors of *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, describe how small victories promote a more positive inner life, which “also leads people to do better work.”

6. Don't suppress painful feelings: When I'm worried about a student, I remember that I don't have to be perfect and that there are weeks left to make a difference. “Mastering the ability to reframe problems is an important tool for increasing your imagination because it unlocks a vast array of solutions.” A good psychotherapist can help you reframe issues, boost your emotional resilience, and enhance your classroom effectiveness.

Finally, don't forget the most important thing. “It's easy to say, ‘It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem,’” said Fred Rogers. “Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.” Don't forget who you are.

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