



Evidence-Based Self-Care Practices to Promote Wellness and Combat Stress and Burnout

We are still in a stressful pandemic crisis of epic proportions. In June 2020, adverse mental health conditions, including suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression increased by two, three, and four times, respectively, as compared to numbers from the same time the previous year (Czeisler et al., 2020). Our vulnerabilities are exacerbated by stress. Unsurprisingly, occupational burnout for educators is high and rising (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Stress is inevitable, even in pre-COVID-19 times. When we open our eyes in the morning and move from a horizontal to a vertical position, our body is stressed. How we manage stress determines whether it has a negative effect. When we manage stress productively and proactively, it's self-care. Research on self-care for school mental health professionals demonstrates a variety of positive outcomes that improve well-being, including better work-life balance, self-regulation, and sense of efficacy (Gill Lopez & Sheehan, 2021).

STRESS AND THE BRAIN

When it comes to both self-care and stress, our brains are in the driver's seat. Stress automatically activates the part of the brain called the amygdala to effect what is commonly known as a fight or flight reaction. As the environments we live in have evolved, so have our brains. Unchecked, our amygdalae remain active, reinforcing a negative bias that causes us to scan the world for the negative, often resulting in unnecessary stress reactions such as heart palpitations and sweaty palms. The prefrontal cortex (PFC), a more evolved part of the brain, can mediate the amygdala's automatic reaction to stress. The PFC is where fear modulation, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making take place (among other things).

There is research that illustrates the relationship between the amygdala's stress reaction and the PFC's role in self-care. In one study, after participants were exposed to a strong emotional trigger, fMRI scans revealed activity in their amygdalae activating a fight or flight reaction. Participants were then instructed to identify a word to describe how they were feeling (emotionally or physically) in that moment. The fMRI scan showed the amygdala stopped activity when the PFC was called upon to label a feeling (Hölzel et al., 2011). This seminal study demonstrates that activities that bring the PFC online can combat the automatic stress reaction of the amygdala. Deliberately focusing attention on neutral or positive things (i.e., the breath, a good time) activates the PFC.

TYPES OF SELF-CARE PRACTICES

Self-care can be conceptualized in a neuroscience framework. There are three neural processes at work in various self-care strategies, producing temporary and enduring results.

1. *Temporary self-care* practices can relieve stress during the activity by releasing feel good hormones and neurotransmitters (oxytocin, endorphin, dopamine, serotonin) that subside after the activity ends.
2. *Enduring self-care* practices can develop a nonjudgmental awareness that strengthens certain neurological functions, such as focused attention and self-regulation.
3. *Enduring self-care* practices can rewire the brain for positivity, counteracting the natural tendency towards negativity.

Temporary Self-Care

Temporary self-care involves activities that release hormones and neurotransmitters that produce positive feelings. Simple self-care practices include those people might ordinarily think about, such as exercising (releases endorphins), eating right and sleeping well (releases serotonin), taking a bath or having dinner with a friend (releases oxytocin), and watching a funny movie or reading a good book (releases dopamine). These activities are considered temporary because the resulting positive feelings wane after the activity ends. Anything that provides a lift in mood, a feeling of peace, happiness, or positive energy, may be considered temporary self-care.

Please note, not all self-care feels easy. A conversation with a difficult colleague or a friend who has become more of a drain than a support is challenging in the moment. Pushing back by setting boundaries at work with colleagues or supervisors may feel stressful. Even choosing to sequester yourself for a long weekend to complete a project that's been weighing on you can be hard. While some strategies may be difficult or stressful in the short term, they are protective self-care in the long term.

Enduring Self-Care

Enduring self-care practices include a mindfulness component that exercises the phenomenon of neuroplasticity to change the physical structure of the brain. Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145).

Mindfulness is the self-care that keeps on giving because it can actually change the structure of our brains, resulting in fundamentally greater focused attention and self-regulation. Studies examining the long-term effects of an 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program revealed participants to have increased mass in cortical regions of the brain, including a thicker prefrontal cortex in 8 weeks similar to the increase in gray matter found in traditional, long-term meditation practitioners (Gotink et al., 2016; Hölzel et al., 2010). A tangible change in the physical structure of the brain after mindfulness interventions is the reason mindfulness infused self-care is enduring.

Mindfulness can increase the ability to choose how to respond in a stressful moment versus being hijacked by the amygdala into reacting without thinking because it can create the space to choose how to focus attention. Mindfulness is sometimes seen as an antidote to stress and burnout because it allows us to be with whatever is happening in the moment without judgment. Research benefits of mindfulness include reduced stress and depression; decreased symptoms of PTSD; increased compassion for self and others; strengthened immune system; improvements in health, including decreases in pain and inflammation; and reduced self-focus and mind wandering that leads to rumination, worrying, and unhappiness (Greater Good Magazine, n.d.).

There are two types of mindfulness: formal and informal. Formal mindfulness involves setting aside time to meditate. Examples of traditional formal practices are focused breathing, body scan, and loving kindness meditation. Informal mindfulness doesn't add to a to-do list. Bringing focused attention to everyday tasks—driving, showering, cooking, eating—can produce the same benefits as formal mindfulness (Hanley et al., 2015).

We can also use our mindfulness muscle to focus attention on the positives in the world. When mindfulness practice shifts from being in the moment with nonjudgmental neutrality to intentionally focusing on positives, it is possible to develop a more optimistic outlook on life. Through the phenomenon of neuroplasticity, we can change our natural inclination for negativity to one of positivity (Cohn et al., 2009; Hanson, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Instead of seeing the glass as half empty, we can shape our brains to view the world through half-full glasses.

Savoring the Good in Practice

Savoring the good is a practice that incorporates the third neural process described above (Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Carter, 2015; Hanson, 2013). The practice described here is focused on the holidays, but its benefits are achieved

by savoring anything that elicits positive feelings. This practice asks you to look for positive facts and let them become positive experiences (Hanson, 2013).

Close your eyes and find your breath. Focus on your breath for several counts. Think of holidays gone by. Identify a holiday memory that you love—it could be something that you look forward to every year or something that happened once when you were 6 that gives you great joy to remember it.

1. Savor the positive experience:
 - a. Relive the memory.
 - b. Take it in through your five senses. See what/who is there (sight), notice scents around you (smell), listen intently (sound), notice how your body/skin feels (touch), and taste whatever is there (taste).
 - c. Feel it in your body and emotions.
2. Immerse yourself in the positive experience, let it soak into your brain and body; record it profoundly in emotional memory.
3. Stay in your memory, breathing into it for a few moments fully experiencing it in mind, body, and spirit.
4. When you're ready, open your eyes.

When you practice savoring the good during positive events in real time, you create neural pathways of positivity more easily and easier to revisit. Try this practice during the holidays and beyond—scanning the world for the positives and absorbing them into mind, body, and spirit.

Whatever we repeatedly sense and feel and want and think is slowly but surely sculpting neural structure. (Hanson, 2013, p. 10)

Other self-care practices that mold the brain positively are mindful gratitude, deep sensory nature walks, always having something to look forward to, and self-care in the background. Positivity promoting practices have benefits similar to mindfulness. Some of these practices require some elaboration. Things that bring joy can promote positive brain changes as self-care in the background. Even during the busiest seasons of life and the school year, when we don't think we have time for self-care, we do. We can surround ourselves with things that elicit joy and develop a habit of dwelling in the positive.

How Do We Shift From a Paradigm of Self-Sacrifice to a Paradigm of Self-Care?

Adults set the tone in schools. If adults are frazzled, youth will be too. Self-care is necessary for school professionals and school climates to be at their best and for children to thrive. In times of heightened stress, such as a worldwide pandemic, self-care is critical for survival. There are two ways to move to a kinder, gentler place where self-care is the priority: (a) intentional group teaching (i.e., professional development) and (b) embedding regular self-care practices into school life (i.e., a minute of breathing at the start of the day over the loudspeaker for the whole school, at the beginning of meetings).

The acronym RISE can be used to as a guide to transcend circumstances and create a culture of self-care. Effective self-care requires:

- **Recognition** that it is important to practice proactive self-care. It's not selfish—it's a quality-of-life health imperative.
- **Intention** to commit to practicing self-care—adopt a self-care mind set.
- **Self-awareness** to check-in to determine what you may need in any moment or to pause and scan the world for the positive.
- **Experiencing** self-care practices routinely and fully, savoring and absorbing the good into mind, body, spirit to burn new neural pathways of positivity and peace and view the world through half-full glasses. (Gill Lopez, 2021)

Two efforts were undertaken to promote a culture of self-care. The first was an intervention consisting of two 3-hour professional development workshops, which included weekly self-care reminders between workshops. Workshops were provided for school mental health professionals, including school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers, who completed before and after surveys. After the second workshop, participants reported significantly greater: psychological, spiritual, and balanced self-care practice; sense of efficacy in student engagement and management; cognitive reappraisal emotion regulation; and observance of mindfulness (Gill Lopez & Sheehan, 2021). Even though there were no significant effects found for burnout, the increases in sense of efficacy and cognitive reappraisal may mitigate the reduced personal accomplishment component of burnout.

The second effort is ongoing—a self-care infused graduate program, where self-care is a recognized hallmark of the program (e.g., self-care is discussed in program documents, during information sessions with prospective students, and in admissions interviews). In the first class of an introduction to school psychology course, students are given an hour presentation on self-care, including experiential practices and their benefits. Students complete a self-care plan at the start of the course and at the end. Throughout the program self-care is emphasized. Various classes begin with a self-care practice. Faculty model self-care by attending to and facilitating growth in the whole student. The goal is that students will develop habits of self-care to take with them into the field to build resilience and protect against stress and burnout. Below is an unsolicited reflection from an intern after 3 years in a self-care infused program.

. . . we have built our own foundations to self-care, so now it's second nature—in my opinion . . . makes it easier for us to identify that the small things we do each day—listening to our favorite music or podcast while driving, taking deep breaths, reflecting and expressing gratitude, exercising/yoga—are all examples of self-care. Because we are able to recognize that, it makes it easier and more realistic for us to stick to a self-care plan . . . [we learned] that we don't "have" to make time for self-care, it should be embedded into our daily routines.

Burnout prevention begins with the recognition that proactive self-care is a necessity. With the right practice, self-care can develop lasting, automatic changes in the way stress is managed. Self-care is a choice that can change lives for the better. It is an oxygen mask that not only benefits the wearer but also those with whom she works.

RESOURCES

Evidence-Based Self-Care Practices to Promote Wellness and Combat Stress and Burnout, Ask the Experts Webinar, Available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/nasp-ask-the-experts-webinar-series/evidence-based-self-care-practices-to-promote-wellness-and-combat-stress-and-burnout>

Beyond Self-Care Sunday: Four Surprising Ways to Prevent School Psychologist Burnout, A Closer Look Blog, Available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/a-closer-look/beyond-self-care-sunday-four-surprising-ways-to-prevent-school-psychologist-burnout>

Care for the Caregivers: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams, Available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/care-for-caregivers-tips-for-families-and-educators/care-for-the-caregiver-guidelines-for-administrators-and-crisis-teams>

NASP Self-Care Resources for School Psychologists, Available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-health/self-care-for-school-psychologists>

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Staff Well-Being, Ask the Experts Webinar, Return to School Series, Available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/nasp-ask-the-experts-webinar-series/secondary-traumatic-stress-and-staff-well-being>

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