

PROMOTING TEACHER WELL-BEING: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

Suggested Audience: Teachers and School Leaders



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This practice brief addresses how educational psychology can inform practical strategies for promoting teacher well-being.

TEACHER WELL-BEING IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Chronic teacher stress and burnout negatively impact teachers' physical, mental, and emotional well-being and are associated with several negative consequences for teachers, students, and schools such as:^{1,2,3}

- Lower self-efficacy
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Emotional exhaustion
- Clinical depression
- Fatigue
- Reduced immunity
- Cognitive aging
- Multiple cancers
- Decreased student motivation, engagement, and achievement
- Reduced productivity
- Higher rates of absenteeism and turnover

Research shows that low-cost, low entry practices can make a significant difference in teachers' lives.⁴ The purpose of this brief is to review these approaches at two systemic levels—the teacher level and the school level, and provide practical, low cost ways to promote teacher well-being at both levels.

THE IMPACT OF MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS ON TEACHER WELL-BEING

- Mindfulness practices have been consistently found to reduce stress, positively impact teacher wellness, promote greater levels of well-being, and are associated with reduced levels of stress and burnout.⁵
 - A meta-analysis of 44 intervention studies to promote K-12 teacher well-being found that only mindfulness interventions were significant in reducing teacher stress and improving well-being.⁶
- Mindfulness interventions consistently show positive effects on teacher well-being.⁷
 - Teachers who participate in mindfulness training experience reduced stress, improved teacher-student relationships, and decreased burnout.⁸

TEACHER BURNOUT STATISTICS

- K-12 employees are the most burnt out workers in the U.S. with 52% of teachers reporting feeling burned out “always” or “very often,” outpacing all other industries nationally by nearly 20%.⁹
- Results from a 2022 NEA survey showed that as many as 90% of teachers consider burnout a serious issue.¹⁰
- More than half of female teachers report experiencing burnout compared to 44% of male teachers, although burn out among male teachers outpaces male workers in all other industries by 18%.¹¹



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS TO PROMOTE WELL-BEING

Teachers can consider participating in intentional mindfulness practices to reduce stress and improve personal well-being, and advocate for school policies that allow for consistent breaks throughout the day.²⁰

- Establishing a regular meditation practice, even just 10 minutes per day, improves well-being.²¹

- Other beneficial mindful practices include walking in nature, breath work, or lying down and doing a body scan meditation.²²
- Some wellness apps offer free subscriptions for educators to provide access to dozens of mindfulness exercises and additional resources to support wellbeing. Teachers should consider using free online resources to support their wellness.

THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED SATISFACTION ON TEACHER WELL-BEING

- Humans have three fundamental needs which must be satisfied to experience psychological well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.¹²
- When school leaders prioritize meeting these needs, teachers experience greater psychological well-being, lower levels of stress and burnout, greater intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, creativity, and performance.¹³
 - Teachers' sense of autonomy is significantly, positively correlated with job satisfaction and well-being.¹⁴
 - Providing teachers with high-quality, needed instructional coaching and professional development opportunities promotes the satisfaction of teachers' need for competence.¹⁵
 - Caring school communities promote connectedness, healthy relationships, greater job satisfaction, and satisfaction of teachers' need for relatedness.¹⁶
- Lack of sufficient breaks in the workplace is associated with greater stress and burnout whereas giving employees sufficient breaks during the workday contributes to greater employee well being and job performance.^{17,18}
- School leaders have the power to meet teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and provide teachers with adequate breaks during the school day using low-cost, practical tools.¹⁹

GAPS & LIMITATIONS

- Individual practices, though helpful, do not promote systemic change. To truly promote teacher well-being, school leaders need to treat teachers as professionals and create healthy schools where both teachers and students can thrive.
- Maintaining habit change is a challenge; there is a significant attrition rate for those who begin mindfulness programs.³² Beliefs about the benefits of mindfulness practice and positive intentions to practice may be a critical factor in sustaining change.³³
- More research is needed on the impact of autonomy-supportive leadership practices, particularly in the effects of changes, like providing teachers breaks during the day, across a variety of school contexts.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO PROMOTE TEACHER WELL-BEING

School leaders can support teachers' well-being by adopting autonomy-supportive leadership practices that meet teachers' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and provide sufficient opportunities for teachers to take breaks throughout the school day to support emotional regulation.

Autonomy

- Provide teachers with reasonable agency and choices with regards to delivering classroom instruction while still meeting required learning standards and using the required curriculum.²³
- Ask for and consider teachers' input when making school-wide decisions to empower teachers with a voice and sense of choice with regards to school policies and procedures that impact them.²⁴
- Use free online survey tools to collect teachers feedback periodically throughout the year, and consider their feedback to make necessary adjustments.²⁵
- Create teams of non-student-facing staff and administrators who are available throughout the school day to allow teachers to step away from their students and take breaks as needed.²⁶

Competence

- Prioritize teachers' access to high-quality instructional coaching and provide opportunities for meaningful professional development that allow them to hone their specialization, pursue their professional interests, and fortify their strengths.²⁷
- Reduce teachers' non-instructional workload by employing assistance from school staff and family volunteers to allow teachers more time and energy to focus on honing their individual skill sets.²⁸

Relatedness

- Cultivate a caring school community that prioritizes love, caring, relationships, and meaningful connections among members.²⁹
- Promote relationship-building by taking time to genuinely connect and get to know teachers, expressing authentic interest in their lives and opinions.³⁰
- Engage in active listening strategies, listen to questions and concerns, and consider teachers' perspectives.³¹

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