

Is Self-Care the Answer?

Kevin Tan and Jenna Mahoney

More than two-thirds of educators in a recent poll by the National Education Association (NEA) said that burnout is a serious problem, and only 10 percent indicated it was not a problem at all (Jotkoff, 2022). Teachers and many others in the helping professions like school social workers and counselors are burning out at alarming rates. Teachers have been asked to go far above their job requirements: 74 percent of respondents had to cover for their colleagues, and 80 percent of respondents said that staffing shortages have caused more work for those educators who are left behind (Jotkoff, 2022). More than half, 55 percent, said they were planning to leave the profession earlier than they had planned (Jotkoff, 2022).

Teacher fatigue, which has been prevalent before the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests against racism, has increased significantly since then (Walker, 2021). A survey of 1,800 teachers in October 2020 found that 81 percent were feeling high levels of stress due to the pandemic (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Repeated transitions between remote, hybrid, and in-person teaching created significant levels of stress (Gershenson & Holt, 2022), and the instructional delivery methods themselves change rapidly. Educators have also been forced to discuss the polarizing topics of masks and vaccinations in their classrooms, which adds to their stress (Gershenson & Holt, 2022).

The impacts on the teaching force broadly are considerable. In Illinois alone, in spring 2022, there were upward of 4,100 teacher openings with 88 percent of administrators reporting that teacher shortage is a problem (Somers, 2022). Student-teacher ratios are rising nationwide, and permanent substitutes rather than licensed teachers are currently leading many classrooms (Ghildial, 2021). Oklahoma and Kansas have had to lower the requirements to be a substitute teacher, such that people who never attended college and have no

formal teacher training are serving as substitutes. New Mexico has asked that members of the National Guard serve as teachers in public schools (Blad, 2022).

Professional burnout particularly impacts educators of color. A survey by RAND Corporation during the winter of 2020 found that Black teachers were twice as likely to leave the profession as teachers overall (Carr, 2022). Public awareness of racial disparities in the impact of the pandemic and of incidences of police brutality can become the occasion for requiring educators of color to take on extra responsibilities such as educating their colleagues on these topics, leading to “racial battle fatigue” (Barmore, 2021) and “Black fatigue” (Winters, 2020).

Such burnout problems operate at the systemic level. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recognized this when it added professional self-care along with personal self-care to its *Code of Ethics* in 2021, stating that “professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice” (NASW, 2021, p. 4). NASW (2021) rightly urges social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions to highlight professional self-care in their policies and practices as well as providing materials to ensure the care of social workers. The practice of personal self-care is important, of course, but it is insufficient, and the current crisis that we are facing with educators and our helping professions requires system-level supports and reform.

SELF-CARE IS NOT THE ONLY ANSWER

I (Jenna Mahoney, second author) burned out as a school social worker over the course of the pandemic and reckoning for racial justice. I have in six years of my practice watched my coworkers pour their hearts into their jobs, and into the students they serve. I have preached the need for teachers to take care of themselves, but then saw that self-care

was not enough, and watched these dedicated teachers leave. “Why do these teachers do this?” was a question that I continually asked myself as a young school social worker. “How can they leave the students that count on them every day? Count on them for love, count on them for stability, and count on them for learning?” Each year I watched more than a quarter of the staff in my school building of 250 students resign and move on, and leave the students that they cared so much about. I saw the students struggle after watching yet another caring adult exit their lives, forever.

For a long time, I viewed teacher attrition to be an individual problem. I blamed my colleagues for not taking good enough care of themselves during the school year. Boundaries, I kept saying. Put up boundaries. Do not think about work unless you are at work. Do things that “fill your bucket” when you are not working. That way when you are at work you can pour your heart into our students. I was confident in my skills as a school social worker, and for a long time I felt like I was able to take my own advice.

The day my perspective changed, a student I worked with daily came to school with a black eye and I could not let it go. She revealed it had been bestowed by her caregiver. I reported it as required, but every day I could not forget that I had seen it, whether I was at work or not. I could not fill my own bucket. A short period of time later another student disclosed abuse. Child protective services deemed both situations unfounded. I was bringing more and more emotional stress home with me. I started to think the problem was the district. I would tell people, including myself, “I am working in a difficult and challenging district.” I attributed my stress to the smallness of the district and its lack of support, expecting that everything would be better if I changed districts, and, after four years in the district where I had gotten my first job, I found a job in a larger district.

In the first year working in my new district, I was able to again feel that I was making a difference. But then one of my school’s teachers, someone I respected and worked closely with, left suddenly mid-year. The relatively low teacher and administrator attrition rate in this district supported my view, much like I had always had about teachers who burned out, that the teacher had just failed to practice self-care. She was letting too many

things get to her and allowing the stresses of the school day to follow her home.

Then March of 2020 happened with the pandemic, and there were riots in my community over that summer following the death of George Floyd caused by police brutality. Many students returned to school that fall with race-related questions. Teachers were instructed to step in and to lead conversations about race relations as best they could based on books the administration recommended and a list of talking points. The teachers at my school handled these conversations with grace, and I participated in many as well. But I could see the toll on the staff, and it was becoming impossible for me to leave work at work because I did not have the physical boundaries of entering and leaving work, with schooling being remote or hybrid. All the lines were blurred. All of my boundaries were dissolving.

It was sometime after the murder of George Floyd that I saw a statement on social media that criticized the idea that self-care could solve teacher burnout. Reading it, I realized how profoundly I had erred in blaming teachers for their own burnout. It dawned on me that maybe this was a systemic issue. Maybe all of the caring adults who serve young humans deserve a system that sees us as valuable, as experts in what we do, that honors the effort we make to set aside our personal difficulties to serve the children. Maybe we deserve a system that cares for us as much as we care for our students.

FIXING THE SYSTEM

I (Kevin Tan, first author) have worked with many teachers and helping professionals over the course of my grant-funded research on social-emotional learning and at workshops that I deliver with districts and at professional conferences across the country. I’ve been hearing more and more stories similar to what was shared here by my coauthor. I personally know of educators and helping professionals who have left their positions. Some of them were my former students, which struck a chord. I questioned whether I have failed to prepare them to meet the challenges of today’s society. Nonetheless, I have always been humbled and encouraged by the resiliency displayed by many of my former students who were brave enough to initiate contact and shared with me their struggles and dreams of wanting to make a societal impact. My

coauthor took the leap of faith to enter our doctoral program with the goal of studying teacher efficacy and socioemotional well-being so that she can better advocate for a more supportive school system. Reforms to our educational system are drastically needed to better support individual and professional self-care. We call on the following changes to address teacher and helping professionals' burnout to ensure that the adults in young people's lives are well situated to give them the attention and resources they deserve.

Provide Emotionally and Physically Safe Working Environment

Schools and social service institutions must do more to both prevent and address burnout among its educators and staff (Smullens, 2021). This includes a safe work environment, a supportive climate and culture, and a caring administration. Violence toward educators has increased while debates on the role of critical race theory in the classrooms and politicization have been ongoing (Silva, 2022). The American Psychological Association (APA) found that among 15,000 school employees in their nationwide survey, one-third had experienced at least one incident of verbal or threatening violence from students, and 40 percent of administrators had experienced verbal or threatening violence from parents (Silva, 2022). That APA survey highlighted that workplace violence has intensified due to the lack of experienced and trained staff (Silva, 2022). One district expressed concerns to parents about the increasing level of disrespect, violence, and abuse toward teachers (Agnew, 2022). Schools must do more to promote a safe and supportive environment for educators, and leadership must come from policymakers in each school district. We must hold school boards accountable for promoting a safe and supportive environment for school staff.

Improve Working Conditions

Educator pay has been stagnant for years (Kini, 2022), and the salary gap between teachers and other college-educated professionals is 19 percent. In a recent study, 64 percent of teachers said that they were working on average 56 hours per week and that their pay was not enough to compensate them for the amount of stress they felt on a daily basis (Kini, 2022). Teachers are working additional hours on nights and weekends and are not being

compensated for that extra work (Kini, 2022). Teachers have also been subjected to parent emails, the volume of messages having increased exponentially due to our increased online activity as a result of the pandemic (Woolcock, 2022). The NEA has been advocating that schools use federal funds to increase teacher pay (Kamenetz, 2022). Offering retention bonuses to those who have continued to work through the pandemic is another way that teachers could be monetarily compensated for their hard work and dedication (Cassellius, 2022).

Address Morale

Acknowledging the difficulties educators face today and showing appreciation can decrease burnout. A study administered to teachers in 16 states reported that administrator support was linked to stronger teacher efficacy, less anxiety, and better work performance (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Addressing the demoralization that teachers feel is vital. Teachers often feel that they have been unable to meet students' needs and that they are not able to do what they are trained to do (Cardoza, 2021). Lack of compassion and empathy toward teachers can engender feelings of shame and isolation among teachers who find work demands excessive (Petro, 2022). District and school building leadership must validate and normalize feelings of guilt and frustration around teacher self-performance, and transparency in decision making is needed.

Destigmatize Burnout

Encouraging discussion of burnout and not the weaponization of self-care against poor work performance is necessary. Organizations that acknowledge and host supportive conversations around burnout help to create awareness and, in the process, destigmatize burnout among their employees (Smullens, 2021). Supervisors play important roles in destigmatizing burnout and helping employees feel supported in the work that they do (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Coworker support is also valuable in preventing burnout (Smullens, 2021). Coworkers who have been educated about burnout, and/or who have experienced burnout, can more easily see the signs in their coworkers and intervene. Providing employees opportunities to take days off and engage in self-care activities helps to create a supportive climate and culture to destigmatize burnout. Ultimately, everyone in a school building must acknowledge that the job of

teaching and supporting students is difficult, and institutional supports can create a supportive environment that destigmatizes and ultimately lessens burnout (Silva, 2022; Smullens, 2021).

WE NEED MORE THAN SELF-CARE IN TODAY'S CLIMATE

There is no doubt that self-care is more important than ever before. Even before the pandemic, increased budget cuts and administrator turnover have led to teachers feeling that they had little control over the day-to-day functioning of the schools where they teach (Stieber, 2022). A strained system has been pushed to the breaking point by the demands of the pandemic and the reckoning for racial justice. There must be greater recognition nationwide on system reforms to support self-care. Educators and many helping professionals are being forced to work in dysfunctional environments with fewer and fewer supports as they serve students with increasing needs.

Moral distress, one of four “attendant syndromes” identified as sources of burnout in the helping professions, is more relevant than ever before in today’s climate; the other syndromes being compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and countertransference (Smullens, 2021). The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among others; the Capitol Insurrection; and the unrest in Charlottesville and Kenosha (to list a few places) can all create moral distress. The ongoing war in Ukraine targeting innocent civilians, including children, and reports of genocide by the Russian military only serve to exacerbate such distress. The antidote to moral distress, *moral courage*—the willingness to engage in social action that is driven by personal convictions despite the risks that others will disapprove (Smullens, 2021)—can only be built with proper system supports.

Indeed, it will take moral courage for those responsible for our schools and broader institutional systems to provide the direction for personal and professional self-care. Secondary traumas require more than self-care if we are to retain educators and school social workers, counselors, and many in the helping professions. Those who are on the front lines every day, mitigating difficult situations with many students, need mental health supports. Difficult situations such as childhood traumas, childhood mental illness, and maladaptive behaviors are often tied to challenging situations. We

urge those in positions of power to foster system-level change in ways that emphasize more than just individual self-care so that it will become possible to address today’s contemporary problems. **CS**

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