

**THE TEACHER
SELF-CARE
MANUAL**

**Simple Strategies for
Stressed Teachers**

PATRICE PALMER

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INTRODUCTION

“Self-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.”

~Eleanor Brown

WHEN I first read the quote above, I felt like Eleanor was speaking directly to me using a nice soft, caring teacher voice. Unfortunately, by that time I had left a career that I loved because of professional burnout. It’s not like I woke up one morning burned out; it was a long, slow burn. I felt guilty because I felt like I wasn’t strong enough or “superwoman” enough to do it all.

As teachers, we give so much to our students. Our career is a labour of love and we pride ourselves on our ability to care and help others. Teaching is a profession that requires giving of oneself to make a difference for students. The ability to empathize with our students often takes place in an environment with little or no job security while meeting the demands of exhausting workloads. The chronic use of empathy and depletion of emotional resources are strongly associated with emotional exhaustion and/or professional burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). For example, students may have faced trauma; in the case of ESL students, they may come from war zones or refugee camps. Sometimes the teacher is the only trusted person in that student’s life. It is difficult not to care for our students when they confide in us or ask for help.

Another problem in higher education is the rise of precarious and insecure work. Part-time positions rarely include health benefits or pay for sick days and that can lead to harmful health effects. At one point, I had seven part-time contracts at one college in order

have the equivalent of a “full-time” salary. These “jobs” ranged from teaching, developing curriculum, managing ESL programs, and recruiting students for specific courses. Precarious work is a growing trend especially for ESL and post-secondary faculty in Canada and other parts of the world. Precarious workers are three times more likely to rate their health as less than good, so the promotion of well-being through access to health benefits is needed along with more stable employment (Access Alliance, n.d.). Emotional depletion, burnout, and high attrition in the profession may be costly for the educational system—both financially and academically (Klusmann, Richter, & Lüdtke, 2016). There is considerable research that further supports this:

- Teachers experience as much stress as paramedics and police officers. (Johnson, 2005)
- Teaching was ranked as the number one most stressful job in the UK in a comparative study of stressful occupations. (Johnson, 2005)
- Teachers are among those professionals with the highest levels of job stress and burnout across many countries. (Stoeber & Renner, 2008)
- Teachers can be involved in 1,000 interpersonal connections in a day (Holmes, 2005). All that contact can be wearing.
- 40% of teachers in US schools leave their jobs within first five years (CPRE, 2014). Increased legislative and administrative regulations, as well as raised education standards contribute to stress, particularly when introduced with few professional development opportunities, planning time, support, or resources (Action & Glasgow, 2015, Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011, Curry, 2012).

THE REWARDS AND HAZARDS OF TEACHING

THE WORK that we do gives us an opportunity to teach, guide, and advise others. These are the joys, rewards, and gifts of our teaching practice and provide us with a sense of satisfaction. I'm sure you feel a sense of pride when you tell people you are a teacher—I do! However, we need to be aware of yellow lights and hazard signs.

The Yellow Light

Before I got behind the wheel of a car, I bought a manual with the rules and signs of the road. It would have been dangerous to get behind a car and drive without this knowledge. We can't neglect road signs, just like we can't neglect "emotional signs" of exhaustion.

When I give presentations on teacher self-care, I use an image of a traffic light. When we see a yellow traffic light, we automatically slow down. So how can we train ourselves to slow down when we need to take a break? As educators, it's important for us to be aware of the warning signs of burnout such as fatigue, mood swings, depression, and loss of empathy.

In my own case, I was physically and mentally exhausted, and had an "I don't care" attitude, but I did not associate it with the process of burning out. I just thought I was irritable and exhausted



because of personal issues in my life. I should have clued in though when I yelled at several people in my department for moving a few boxes near my desk. I felt impatient with students (which had never happened before) and stopped caring about my career. But I didn't put two and two together. The worst incident was that I had a falling out with a good teacher friend, whom I had known well for 5 years. Sadly, our friendship ended due to my refusal to meet and talk things out. I didn't have the energy or will to deal with it. I strongly encourage teachers to watch for warning signs in yourself and in your colleagues.

Dr. Christine Maslach has conducted extensive research in the area of burnout and has designed a survey for educators called the Maslach Burnout Inventory. You can take it online at <https://www.mindgarden.com/316-mbi-educators-survey>. It's affordable to take one test, but you may want to talk to your administrator or school and see if they will pay for a group of teachers to take the test. The test takes about 10-15 minutes and asks you to rate how often you feel emotionally drained or feel indifferent toward the students, for example. I strongly urge you to take the test as a pre-emptive measure.

Warning signs can help you make changes before it is too late as in my case. I believe that one of the reasons why I did not recognize my burning out was because I didn't know anything the signs or behaviours. If someone would have told me that I would leave a job that I described for many years as "the best job in the world", I wouldn't have believed it. I regret that I didn't know the signs and therefore didn't take any measures to change what was going on in my life.

What I learned about returning to the classroom is that I matter and taking care of myself is a priority. I believe it is all about balance too. In hindsight, I was one of those who was too busy driving from place to place to stop and fill that gas tank as it hovered at empty.

I understand how important it is for teachers to take care of themselves. We need to be able to give ourselves permission to rest, relax, and connect with friends and family. I have made a point of telling younger teachers about my own experience to help them make healthy decisions about marking and lesson preparation. Years ago, I was at my son's basketball game but I wasn't watching because I was marking papers. He noticed what I was doing (most likely because my head was down for the whole game). On the way home in the car, he said, "Mom, you never watched me play at all tonight." I could hear the disappointment in his voice. If you ask me today if I remember his comment, I do. If you ask me if I remember what I was marking that night, I don't. Which was more important? In hindsight, I wasn't present and regret that time lost.



Hazards

Hazards are conditions that can accelerate our burning out. Despite the joys and rewards, teaching is a difficult and stressful job.



I've listed some of the hazards that we should be aware of as a teacher. A hazard is anything that can cause danger or create a problem. We use our car hazard lights to warn others that you are a temporary hazard and some of the hazards listed below can be temporary. For example, you may be given a new grade or level to teach in the future, which would remove that hazard. You may have a very large class one semester but fewer students in the next semester. The key here is to realize that any or a combination of con-

that you haven't thought about. As a starting point, complete the self-care assessment below. This exercise has been adapted from two resources from Saakvitne & Pearlman and Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison.

When you are finished, look for patterns in your responses.

Add the date that you completed the assessment. Then set a reminder a month from now, three months from now, and six months from now to see if there are any positive changes.

SELF-CARE ASSESSMENT

Write down any self-care activities you engage in regularly.

It may be helpful to think about the different spheres of your life: physical, psychological, mental, emotional, spiritual and professional. What activities do you do that attend to self-care in each area?

For example,

Physical Self-Care

- Do you eat meals regularly and maintain a healthy diet?
- Do you see your doctor for preventative care?

Psychological Self-Care

- Do you read something fun or interesting and unrelated to work
- Do you get engaged in something interesting to you such as art, theater, or sports.

Emotional Self-Care

- Spend time with people you enjoy
- Do you stay in touch with important friends and family?
- Do you practice self-compassion, forgive yourself, and even praise yourself for good deeds?

Spiritual Self-Care

- Do you spend time in nature, even if it's a short walk or having a meal outside
- Have you built a spiritual connection or community?

MY NEW MINDSETS

A *MINDSET* is an established set of attitudes. Like many people in my generation, I grew up in a household where my parents worked

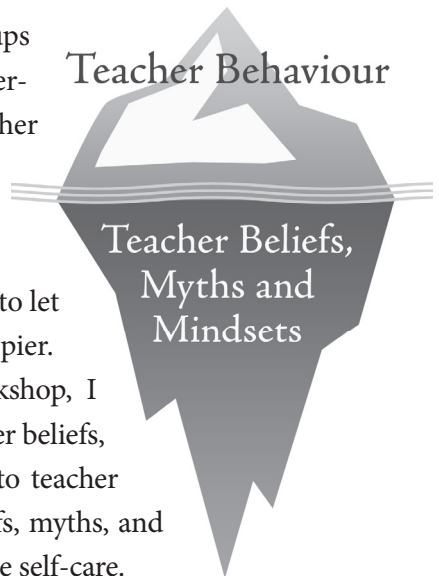


very hard. My father was not home much because he was always working. When he was home and saw me, or my two sisters being idle, he would remark that there must be **SOMETHING** that we could be doing. My worldview is that one should always work hard and never be idle. I still fight this belief now even though I'm getting much better at allowing myself

downtime. I talk to many teachers who were also raised by very hard-working parents and have an incredible work ethic.

A mindset may be held by groups who adopt or accept behaviours or certain choices. Would you say that a teacher mindset may be one of working late, constant planning, and don't stop till you drop attitude? It is this "groupthink" as teachers that we have to let go off in order to be healthier and happier.

In a recent teacher self-care workshop, I asked teachers to discuss and list teacher beliefs, myths, and mindsets that contribute to teacher behaviour. I then asked how the beliefs, myths, and mindsets impact their ability to practice self-care.



Here are some of the beliefs they shared which can hurt them in the long run and lead to burnout:

- marking must be returned to students by the next class.
- all errors should be corrected (even though research suggests that this does not help students be better writers).
- teaching is about choosing between self-sacrifice and self-care.
- teachers need to answer questions even on a coffee break or during lunch, leaving no time to eat, drink, or use the bathroom.
- teachers must have all the answers.
- teachers never make mistakes.
- we must work now, and rest late.
- teachers don't take sick days.

We can't do away with mindsets altogether. What we can do is get rid of harmful beliefs and replace them with healthier mindsets. Here are some of the new mindsets I adopted.

Mindset 1: I Matter!

This was the most challenging mindset because for my entire career, I did not put myself first. I truly and strongly believe that I matter and people who love me think I matter too. While studying positive psychology, I came across a profound quote by Dr. Chris Peterson: "Other people matter." Peterson is one of the 100 most-cited psychologists in the world, one of the founding fathers of positive psychology including the impactful work of character strengths and virtues. When I read the quote, it made me reflect on its powerful message and that if other people matter, then I must matter too.

The activity below might help you achieve Mindset 1.

BEST POSSIBLE SELF ACTIVITY

This intervention was created by positive psychology Sonja Lyubomirsky and involves creating a detailed mental image of yourself at your best in all areas of your life—not just work. The purpose of this kind of positive intervention or activity is to cultivate a sense of optimism because it provides a buffer against negative health effects that you may be experiencing (e.g. stress, exhaustion, or burnout). Optimism provides us with a powerful feeling of the future. If you are struggling now at work, this is a simple but meaningful activity. This activity works best when combined with your self-care strategies.

Instructions:

Give yourself time and space to do this. The goal is to imagine yourself at some future date. It could be a month, six months, a year, or five years. The time period that you choose will be when you have fully implemented your self-care goals. Imagine how this feels for you and what your life looks like. You may write in a journal or in the form of a letter to your present self from this future self.

- Acknowledge and appreciate everything you did to get to where you are at this future point in your life.
- Allow your future self to express gratitude to the self who did (and will do) these things for you.
- Offer your present self words of compassion for overcoming your present challenges.
- Tell your present self the good that your future self sees in him/her, and the strengths (use your character strengths) that will help your present self become your future self.

Mindset 2: Guilt Be Gone!

Where does teacher guilt come from? When I think back to teacher mindsets, there is this invisible message that teachers must constantly do their best for their students (e.g. get that marking done, prepare outstanding lessons, be creative, and interesting while teaching). I am not advocating being lazy or slacking on your

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUB

SHARING OUR thoughts and ideas from any book can be insightful and interesting. Think about how organizing a “book-club” discussion can further support teacher self-care. I have provided some questions to get you started.

1. What stood out for you from the book?
2. What are specific ways that you practice self-care now?
3. How can the image of the traffic signals guide us in increasing our well-being and taking time for our own self-care?
4. What are some teacher beliefs, mindsets, and myths that influence teacher behaviour and result in bad habits? Where do we learn these things? How can we challenge them? How can they impact our self-care?
5. How can we support each other to ensure self-care practices? (individually, interpersonally, and at an organizational level)
6. Would the formation of a well-being committee facilitate teacher well-being and self-care practices at your school? How can this be done?
7. Would surveying faculty be a useful way to gather feedback on the current state of teacher well-being or ill-being?

Best Possible Self Activity

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