

EDUCATION

# Why Teacher Self-Care Matters and How to Practice Self-Care in Your School

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Because teaching is such an intensive job, educators can greatly benefit from learning about and practicing self-care. Unfortunately, teachers may worry that taking care of themselves can lead to self-absorption and distract them from their students. However, despite the misleading title, self-care isn't at all about selfishness.

In fact, practicing self-care can be in the best interest of everyone in your classroom. Self-care is all about taking care of your health and making sure that you have everything you need to thrive as a teacher. Without taking care of yourself, you won't have the energy to help your students.

Self-care can keep you at the top of your game and ready to handle any challenges that come up during your teaching career. Read on to discover what self-care is, why it's important for educators, and how to bring it into your daily life as well as into your school.

## What is Self-Care?

Self-care is an important component of a teacher's mental health, but there are misconceptions about what it is. It's common for educators to dismiss the self-care movement as "selfish" or "superficial." But for teachers, self-care is so much more than breakfast in bed or treating yourself to a spa day. It's about taking care of your health so that you're prepared to be the best teacher you can be for yourself and your students.

The definition of self-care is any action that you use to improve your health and well-being. According to the National Institute of Mental Illness (NAMI), there are six elements to self-care:[2]

- Physical
- Psychological
- Emotional
- Spiritual

Ideally, a healthy self-care strategy should include an activity that addresses each of these factors every day. That way, you can make sure that every element of your overall health and well-being is taken care of. Self-care activities can be small- to large-scale habits, with examples ranging from packing a healthy lunch to waking up early every day to do a [mindfulness meditation](#) before work.

Some teachers may make the mistake of confusing self-care with self-indulgence. But unlike self-care, self-indulgent activities don't have lasting benefits. While self-care helps promote long-term health, self-indulgent habits (like binge watching TV or eating too much junk food) substitutes solutions to problems with short-term fixes.[4] Although teachers are right to avoid self-indulgence if possible, everyone not only deserves self-care but needs it to thrive.

## Why Is Self-Care Important for Teachers?



The importance and benefits of self-care extend to every profession, but within some careers it is more stigmatized than in others. People in caregiving positions like teachers, for example, often find it easier to tell others to take care of their health than to do so themselves.[7] Because educators are encouraged to focus so much energy on others and so little on themselves, self-care is necessary for teachers to maintain good mental health.

In particular, self-care can be a great way to prevent or treat teacher stress. Over 40% of teachers report feeling high stress every day during the school year,

which ties teaching with nursing as having the highest stress rate of any career.[13] Causes of stress can include lack of resources, class behavioral problems, or pressure relating to standardized test expectations, just to name a few, but they all lead to the same outcomes: weakened physical and emotional health.[1,5]

When left unchecked, [teacher stress](#) can lead to burnout and contribute to the high turnover rate in education. But self-care can turn this around and help keep teachers from getting burned out.[4] This means that self-care isn't just a good personal habit, but it's in your students' and colleagues' best interest, too. By eating well, sleeping enough, exercising, and finding other ways to take care of yourself, self-care can help you reach your potential in the classroom, which will in turn help your students succeed, too.[8]

## Self-Care Ideas for Teachers

Now that you've learned why self-care can be one of the best [stress management strategies for teachers](#), it's important to find ways to incorporate it into your daily life. Making time for self-care doesn't require you to rearrange your entire schedule. By taking small steps every day and figuring out how to take care of yourself, you can cultivate health and well-being.

Because every person's schedule and specific needs are different, practicing self-care can look different for everyone. A list of self-care activities for teachers could include the following ideas:

- Because teaching can be socially overwhelming, make sure to plan at least 10 or 20 minutes a day where you can take a break and decompress by yourself.[3]
- Without a sense of compassion for yourself, you can't practice positive self-care. If you struggle with low confidence levels, find ways to work on and improve your self-image.[2]

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...ing a self-care "emergency pack" to school with things you enjoy so you can de-stress during your break if needed.[4]

- Social support is an important factor in self-care, so find a way to connect with loved ones at least once a day. This could be having dinner with your family, calling a friend, or relaxing with your significant other.[1]

Once you've brainstormed a few self-care activities that work for you, the next step is making time for them in your schedule. Create a plan to engage yourself in all the elements of self-care every day.[6] If you find yourself lacking a specific element, focus on it and find activities that help you feel fulfilled in that way. If you're feeling low on social self-care, for example, you could make sure to visit a friend at least once or twice a week. Or if you're lacking physical self-care, you could make it a habit to go to the gym every day after work.

Sometimes, stress and burnout can become severe enough that teachers can't overcome it on their own.[1] In this case, one of the best things you can do for yourself is to seek counseling or another form of professional help.[6] Medical professionals can help teachers put together a self-care plan that addresses specific needs, as well as treat burnout or mental illnesses like anxiety or depression.

## Five Self-Care Activities for Class

Now that you understand how self-care can help you reach your potential as a teacher, you may also want to use group self-care activities in class. Student stress is just as prevalent and damaging for children as it can be for educators. Practicing self-care activities can help students learn how to manage and cope with challenging situations.[5]

Here are five self-care activities that you can use with your students to teach them the importance of personal health:

- **Personal reflection activities** can help teach students how to process their emotions. Try journaling or having group discussions about how your students are feeling about a certain topic and what that means to them.[2]
- One of the most important elements of self-care is **social-emotional health**. For this reason, doing **get-to-know-you activities** as a class can help students bond with their classmates and feel less alone.[9]
- School can sometimes be overwhelming for students, too. Plan quiet time for reading or doing homework into your class schedule so students have time to decompress
- Try doing a read-aloud with books that teach students important social-emotional skills. *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss, *The Dot* by Peter H. Reynolds, and *We're All Wonders* by R. J. Palacio are all books that teach social skills.[10]
- Mindfulness is another way to help students take care of themselves when they're stressed. Try doing breathing activities or mindfulness meditation as a class, especially if your students seem overwhelmed.[11]

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