

Toolkit

8 Educator Wellness Strategies for 2024



Introduction

Educator Wellness

It's a new year and many of us are entering our classrooms with a heightened sense of awareness of the connection between our personal and professional lives. With New Year's Resolutions everywhere we turn and social media overflowing with "New Year/New You" messages, there is a collective urge for newness to be on our minds.

While it may be tempting to set lofty resolutions only to abandon them on January 17 (Ditch New Year's Resolution Day), what would it be like if you focused instead on carving out just 3-5 minutes each day for a practical, effective strategy that will sustainably support you and your wellbeing as an educator throughout this year?

What is Educator Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is focused on the balance between pleasure, life purpose, and interpersonal relationships (O'Brien & Guiney). Educator wellbeing encompasses various aspects such as managing workload, coping with stress, maintaining physical health, and fostering a positive work-life balance. Creating a balance between one's personal needs and the expectations of the school equates to an educator establishing a sense of wellbeing (Petegem et al).



Why is Educator Wellbeing Important?

Having a strong sense of wellbeing leads to educators being happier, more engaged, and having increased levels of empathy and appreciation (O'Brien & Guiney). They are also better equipped to manage the challenges of the teaching profession, including classroom management, student diversity, and the ever-changing educational landscape.

Research has consistently shown a correlation between educator wellness and student outcomes. According to a study published in the "Journal of Educational Psychology," teachers who reported higher levels of stress and burnout were more likely to observe disengagement and learning difficulties in their students.



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Conversely, educators who reported higher levels of personal accomplishment and well-being were more likely to have students who performed better academically and showed greater engagement in learning. “Teacher wellbeing is associated with better student wellbeing and with lower student psychological difficulties as well as lower teacher depressive symptoms being associated with better student wellbeing” (Harding et al). In other words, when you are in a balanced psychological and physical state of being, you will have a positive and significant impact on your students.

What Does Educator Wellbeing Look Like?

Breathing exercises, movement practices, and relaxation techniques can have a profound impact on your wellbeing when incorporated into your daily routine.

Below you will find eight strategies that you can choose from to start your journey to reduce stress, improve your sense of calm, and support your overall wellbeing.



Cooling Breath

SEL*F Component: Breath Awareness

CASEL Competency: Self-Management

Purpose: Cools the body, focuses the mind

Instructions

1. Settle in. Find a comfortable position for your body now (standing or seated). Open your heart, relax your shoulders down your back, and lengthen your spine. We are going to practice a Cooling Breath to calm our minds and energize our bodies.
2. Roll up your tongue (like a “U” shape), and take a big breath in through the space between your tongue. Feel the cool air travel through your mouth, down your throat, and into your entire body as you complete the inhale.
3. Now, exhale all the air through your nose, noticing the temperature and quality differences between this breath and your cooling inhale.
4. As you continue to breathe in through your rolled tongue and out through your nose, pay attention to any subtle changes happening in your mind and body.

Reflection Questions

What did you experience in your body on each cooling inhale?

What did you experience on your body on each exhale?

What differences in quality did you notice between a cooling breath and a normal breath?



Teaching Tip: Trauma-Informed

Breathwork may be triggering for those who are experiencing recent trauma. If you are struggling with this practice, you may choose to engage in belly breathing instead, or to simply observe your breath.



Creating Space

SEL*F Component: Settle In

CASEL Competency: Relationship Skills

Purpose: Encourages vulnerability, enhances mindful listening and speaking skills.

Instructions

1. Find a partner for this exercise.
2. Settle into a comfortable position (seated or standing). For the next 1-5 minutes, you will be creating space together to vulnerably share what you are currently experiencing in your lives, such as your intentions for the day, your fears, or any boundaries you currently need.
3. This mindful listening space is intended for you and your partner to share anything that needs to be cleared for you to be fully present.
4. Acknowledge our shared guidelines. Then, begin.
 - One person will speak at a time. Each person will have the same amount of time to speak, and speaking is a choice.
 - Only share if you feel called to do so.
 - When it is not your turn to talk, your role is solely to mindfully listen to the speaker. We won't be commenting, judging, or responding.
 - If there is space between speakers, maintain the silence. Silence is okay.



Teaching Tip: Honoring Silence

Sharing personal experiences (intentions, fears, boundaries, etc.) with peers can feel particularly intense, and at times overwhelming. Give yourself the space to process, and be okay with any moments of silence that arise.

Reflection Questions

What did you notice about yourself as a listener during this experience?

What did you learn about yourself through sharing?

What was most challenging for you about creating space?



Chair N' Twist

SEL*F Component: Mindful Movement

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Releases tension, builds strength, enhances mind-body connection.

Instructions

1. We are going to do a chair pose and add some twists. This works our legs and arms and also stimulates our heart and diaphragm.
2. Stand up and settle into your body. Plant your feet flat onto the ground, hips-width distance apart. Open your heart, relax your shoulders down your back, and lengthen your spine.
3. From Mountain pose, raise your arms towards the sky, with your palms and inner elbows facing inward. Relax your shoulders.
4. As you exhale, bend your knees as if sitting in a chair. Keep your thighs parallel to one another as you sink deeper into your seat, and breathe.
5. On the next exhale, move into a side twist by extending your right arm back behind you, twisting your torso to the right, and bringing your left arm in front of you. Take a deep inhale, and on the exhale, twist a little bit deeper. Continue to breathe here.
6. On your next inhale, return to Chair Pose by bringing your torso back to center and arms raised to the sky.
7. On your next exhale, move into a side twist on the other side by extending your left arm back behind you, twisting your torso to the left, and bringing your right arm in front of you. Take a deep inhale, and on the exhale, twist a little bit deeper. Continue to breathe here.
8. Inhale and come back to center, and return to your chair.
9. Repeat as many times as you like and make sure to even out both sides.
10. When you feel complete, press into your feet and lengthen your spine, rising into Mountain Pose. Take 3 collective breaths here, noticing how you feel.

Reflection Questions

How do you feel now after twisting out your body?

How did the physical practice impact your emotional experience?

When would it be helpful for you to practice the Chair N' Twist?

Teaching Tip: Emotional Release

Twists help wring out excess tension in the body. Utilize this practice when you need to release tension or emotions that don't serve you.



Partner Pack

SEL*F Component: Community Connection

CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making

Purpose: Releases excess energy, fosters collaboration, builds relationships.

Instructions

1. We are going to build strength and balance by lifting one another onto our backs - like a human backpack! This takes concentration and collaboration and requires that we are respectful of our own and each other's bodies. Through this process, we will stretch our spines and chests (backbend), as well as release our backs and hamstrings (forward fold).
2. Choose a partner around the same height as you, find an open space, and stand back-to-back.
3. Plant your feet firmly on the floor, with your backs touching. As you settle into this position, hook your arms together at your elbows.
4. Decide who is going to be the first to lift (Partner 1), and who is going to be the first to be lifted (Partner 2).
5. Partner 1: Gently fold forward, keeping your elbows hooked to your partners'. Partner 2: As your partner bends forward, relax your back onto your partner's back until your feet begin to lift. As your feet gently lift off the ground, continue to rest heavy and open your heart. Take a few collective breaths here together.
6. Switch roles and repeat the process.
7. Continue to take turns lifting each other off the ground. Count how many breaths you can take together while one partner's feet are lifted off the ground and challenge yourselves to increase your breath count over time.



Teaching Tip: Variations

Partner Pack can also be done seated on the floor or with chairs (move the chair so that the back of the chair is to the side). You can also receive similar benefits by practicing a forward fold and backbend on your own on a chair.

Reflection Questions

How did you feel while doing this pose?
How do you feel now?

How did you and your partner communicate in this posture?

What did you appreciate most about this experience?



Thankful Thoughts

SEL*F Component: Focus

CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Self-Awareness

Purpose: Fosters appreciation, increases focus, enhances mind-body connection.

Instructions

1. Find a comfortable seat and settle in.
2. Gently focus your eyes on one point or close them completely, whichever is more comfortable. Take a few collective breaths in and out.
3. As you continue to breathe, begin to visualize one person in your life you are particularly grateful for right now. Visualize their face smiling at you. Exhale, send this person your smile. Take a deep breath of gratitude in, and exhale, sending this person a silent “thank you.”
4. Now, bring to mind another person in your life you are particularly grateful for right now. Visualize them smiling at you. Exhale, send this person your smile. Take a deep breath of gratitude in, and exhale, sending this person a silent “thank you.”
5. Now, bring your attention to as many people as you wish that you are grateful for right now. Visualize all their faces smiling at you. Exhale, send these people your smile. Take a deep breath of gratitude in, and exhale, sending all these people a silent “thank you.”
6. To close, take 3 collective breaths of gratitude together. Inhale, exhale. Breathe in, breathe out. Most appreciative breath of the day, exhale all your love out.



Teaching Tip: Scaffolding

When you first try this practice, ask prompting questions during each stage of the visualization to focus on someone you are grateful for. Over time, you will be able to bring to mind these people with less cueing.

Reflection Questions

Why is it important to be thankful for ourselves? For others?

What did it feel like to think about and appreciate the people you love?



Hopes N' Dreams

SEL*F Component: Creative Expression

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making

Purpose: Builds self-confidence, deepens self-reflection, increases motivation.

Instructions

1. Come into a comfortable seated position. Bring your hands to your heart, and feel your heart beating beneath your hands. Focus your gaze on one point, or close your eyes.
2. As you breathe in and out of your nose, begin to think about the greatest hopes and dreams you have for yourself right now. Ask yourself: "What would it look like for me to be the happiest, greatest version of myself?"
3. Picture your dreams actually coming true for you right now. As you do this, notice what is happening around you. Where are you? What are you doing? Who are you with?
4. Now, bring your attention to what is happening inside you. How are you feeling as your greatest version of you? What is happening inside your body? Take a big happy breath here. Breathe in; breathe out.
5. Now, open your eyes, and take your hopes and dreams to your paper! We are going to spend some quality time creatively drawing or writing out our hopes so that we can always be reminded what we care about. When we get clear about what our dreams are, we can actually follow our dreams and make them come true!
6. When you are finished drawing or writing, find a colleague and share your hopes and dreams with each other!



Teaching Tip: Community Involvement

Create a "Hopes N' Dreams Wall" in your school and display each faculty's and student's hopes and dreams artwork or writing on the wall. This can serve as an ongoing source of inspiration.

Reflection Questions

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?

What did it feel like to picture yourself following your dreams?

What actions can you take now to make your dreams come true?



Sound Stretch Release

SEL*F Component: Relaxation

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Relaxes the body, enhances awareness of thoughts, feelings and senses.



Instructions

1. Settle into a comfortable seated position. Lengthen your spine, relax your shoulders down your back, and open your heart.
2. Focus on every inhale and exhale. Pay attention to the movement of your breath as it rises and falls in your body.
3. Begin by drawing your attention to the sounds that are close by. Notice the noise and texture of the sounds you hear in this room.
4. Next, stretch your awareness to include the sounds that are outside the room. Be here with the sounds. Continue to breathe in and out, as you listen to the faraway sounds.
5. Now, feel the sensations arising in your body. Draw your attention to the bottom of your feet... your belly... your shoulders... your heart...your jaw... the back of your head. No need to change anything, just observe. Feel the sensations.
6. Finally, expand your awareness to your thoughts. Observe each thought without judging it as good or bad. If your mind starts to drift, return your focus to your breath, and become the observer again. Witness your thoughts move through you.
7. Go back through the prompts in reverse order (sounds outside the room, sounds inside the room). Close by listening for the sound of your breath and heart.
8. Finally, stretch your awareness to the farthest away sound you can hear. Focus on it. Take a few deep breaths.

Reflection Questions

How did this experience of focusing only on sound change the way you think about listening? How can this impact how you listen to others?

What sounds did you observe? Were there many sounds, or only a few?



Teaching Tip: Anxiety Reduction

Focusing on a distant sound shifts those who may be in a state of anxiety or stress into their parasympathetic nervous system response. This is a powerful practice for transitioning out of a high-intensity situation into teaching, learning or simply a state of rest.

Two-Word Check-In

SEL*F Component: Closing

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness

Purpose: Enhances emotional awareness, promotes authenticity, builds community.

Instructions

1. Place both hands on your heart, and connect to your breath. Keep a soft gaze or close your eyes.
2. Take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out.
3. As you continue to breathe, notice how you are feeling right now. What emotions are you experiencing inside you? How are you feeling after the activities? Every emotion is welcome; give yourself permission to be exactly as you are. Take a few more moments here to connect to how you are feeling.
4. Now, choose two words to describe how you are feeling.
5. When you have your two words in mind, softly open your eyes.
6. If you feel called to, share your words and this toolkit with an educator colleague.

Reflection Questions

What two words did you choose to describe how you are feeling?

How did it feel to connect to your feelings?

What was it like to describe your feelings in two words?



Teaching Tip: Variations

You can share a word, two words, or a sentence—whatever you feel is right in the moment.



Additional Resources

7 Bonus Ideas

1. Nighty Night

Create an evening routine to wind down before bed.

This can include: taking a bath, reading a book before bed, turning off electronics 1 hour before bed.

2. Hold It

Create boundaries between home and school, such as:

- Leaving school at a reasonable time every day and turning off your teacher's brain so that you can truly relax at home.
- Limiting, or eliminating, the amount of schoolwork you bring home.

3. Move It

Move your body to release tension and stress by:

- Having a solo dance party (or invite your home-mates and pets to join you!)
- Joining Michelle Cordero on the mat, our Breathe For Change lead trainer, at one of our trainings



4. What about your friends?

Consistently check in with family and friends that you hold dear by:

- Scheduling one day a week to meet with a friend, family member, or loved one (brunch maybe?)
- Sending a text/email letting a dear friend know that they are on your mind
- Having lunch with a colleague/staff member whose company you enjoy



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5. Nomnomnom

Eat at least one (1) balanced meal per day.

A few suggestions for you:

- Add cooked, raw, or steamed veggies (ex: collard greens, swiss chard, cabbage, asparagus, spinach, broccoli) to at least one meal per day
- Eat mindfully: relish each fork/spoonful of food slowly and intentionally. Savor each bite from the first to the last. How can you experience your senses while you enjoy your meal?

6. Gratitude-Ratitude

Establish an attitude of gratitude. What can you be grateful for in all that you do? You can practice gratitude by:

- Writing an appreciation note to yourself
- Letting a colleague know how they supported you and that you are grateful that you get to work with them

7. Keep on Growin'

Adopt a growth mindset to foster and nurture your growth and development as an educator and individual.

- When a task is challenging, engage in positive self-talk to keep your eyes on the prize and powerfully move forward
- The process of questions and answers solves problems. So go ahead, ask your question!

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