



# COPING:

STRATEGIES TO FILL  
IN THE G.A.P.  
GROUNDING  
ANALYZING  
PROGRESS BUILDING

STAY  
GROUNDED

# BUILDING SAFETY WITH THE THREE C'S

CONSISTENCY — CARE  
COMMUNICATION



# CONNECTIONS

BUILDING POSITIVE  
RELATIONSHIPS AND  
BUILDING TRUST

-ASSET BASED  
TEACHING

-STRENGTHS FOR  
STRUGGLES

-RESTORATIVE  
REINTEGRATION

## CHAPTER 2

# HEALING

Tears ran down Jordan's cheeks as she sat writing in her journal. I asked her if she wanted to talk. Nodding, she followed me to the doorway. Once outside, she told me her father might be going back to jail. She sobbed as she wondered aloud where she would go. Jordan's story turned into the tale of a mother who was out of the picture and a family that rejected her. I hugged her. The weight of the world was on her shoulders. "I care for you, and so do a lot of other people. What you're going through isn't easy, but you'll get through this, Jordan. For now, take a breath and look at what you know. Just take it moment by moment."

A few days later, Sean tells me he is haunted from finding the dead body of a friend on his couch. It echoes in his head. Aaron whispers to me that his mom and her boyfriend broke up. He knows his mom doesn't have money to pay the rent. Every day he worries they will lose everything.

The walls of the school stand firm as the foundations of people within them tremble. I sit with them. I listen. I give them a safe space. You can't skip to hope from despair. The path to hope starts with safety because trauma is anything but safe.

You don't usually see trauma coming. You fall into it much like a pit. Maybe yours came because of a disease, the loss of someone you cared about, or pain caused by another. The first thing you feel is pain as you hit the bottom. This is followed by a desperate attempt to get out of the pit. Your only quest is to escape from the deep feelings, avoid more pain, and search for safety. After so many days, the pit can become a grave for hope. And that's precisely what happened to my own children.

## ENTER PAIN

My world, life views, and purpose changed the day my five children arrived on my doorstep. My husband and I had trained for weeks to get to this point. We watched videos explaining trauma, read books on relationships, trained in mental health first aid, and took classes to learn parenting techniques. According

to the Department of Social Services, we were certified, well-rounded parents. According to the world, we had all the preparation we needed. We both wanted nothing more than to be a loving mom and dad.

Then the kids showed up, and despite the books, training, classroom experiences, and parenting groups, nothing had prepared me. Their problems weren't black-and-white case studies. I wanted nothing more than to love them and see them happy.

Sadly, my five children had come from a situation that was anything but happy. The police report, written by a veteran officer, stated that when he had picked them up, their home was filled with rotten food and mountains of trash bags infested with flies, maggots, and gnats. He stated that it was one of the worst situations he had ever witnessed in all his years as a police officer.

The children had been neglected and abused at the hands of their parents. The adults who were supposed to shelter and protect them had betrayed them. After they were removed from their home, they were bounced round to a few foster families. At night Dominick, one of my younger boys, would cry and shake as a mechanism to fall asleep. He wrapped himself in trauma instead of blankets. Their world had been shattered. They had come to live in the pit of trauma. Hope was a distant memory.

The moment they crossed the threshold I swore to myself that I would help bring them out of the pit. I knew the odds were stacked against me. My children had enough adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to fill two hands, and they were all under ten. I wanted to see them happy, but I was in for a fight because the brain doesn't want to let go of pain.

Trauma sticks with us. We tend to define ourselves according to our catastrophes. As I stated in the first chapter, the human brain remembers trauma clearly to keep you safe. A research study published in the Association for Psychological Science by Boston College psychologist Elizabeth Kensinger shows "that whether an event is pleasurable or aversive seems to be a critical determinant of the accuracy with which the event is remembered, with negative events being remembered in greater detail than positive ones."<sup>1</sup> It's the reason you might not recall what happened in February 2020 but most likely remember March of 2020 when COVID-19 impacted schools and states everywhere. The brain recalls dangerous moments to help us isolate what caused us danger. It's the reason some people can remember great details of situations and others choose to repress the moment.

Helping create a safe environment for students that fosters healing allows the brain to concentrate on learning. The purpose of school and teaching is to educate students, and we can't do that properly if we don't help students with trauma. It's imperative for schools to create school cultures that recognize, understand, and implement practices to help a student access the curriculum. Having resources that help all students feel safe is essential for enhancing children's cognitive capacity and inspiring them to learn. Plus, these healing-centered practices can challenge views students may have of themselves, their relationships with adults, and even their life circumstances. If we want to truly teach students, we have to provide a place where students feel protected so they can heal and learn.

Helping create a safe environment for students that fosters healing allows the brain to concentrate on learning.

## RECOGNIZING TRAUMA

No matter how hard I wanted to cover up or erase the pain my children experienced, I couldn't. We can't change what's already been done. I couldn't change Jordan's situation. I couldn't wave a wand and make her problems within her family dissipate. School doors welcome all kinds of people who carry all kinds of burdens. What do all the people walking into your building need? To feel safe. For most, feeling safe will come easily with a simple welcoming smile, but for those who have trauma or ACEs, it's not so easy.

When you fall into the pit of trauma, the first thing you worry about is the environment. Will you get hurt more? Will the ground give way? Will you start falling again? You want safety, but trauma has broken your trust. When my children arrived, I showed them their rooms and where to store their belongings, set some ground rules, and went straight to relationship building. That's the first mistake I made. My children had been forcibly controlled for their entire lives, and I unknowingly triggered a trauma response by giving them very little sense of control. They saw their rooms and new belongings but immediately ran to huddle together in the living room.

I didn't understand. Everything looked safe but didn't feel safe. It also hit me that they would have to go to school with this pain and these survival reactions. What would happen to them there? Would they be lost in the crowd? Would they suffer in silence? Their situation made me wonder how many people go to school with invisible backpacks full of pain.

It's necessary to know that children with trauma may take longer to feel safe because their brains have dug out a neural pathway of survival reactions to keep them safe. A person's thoughts and feelings are similar to water flowing on a surface. The more a person's thoughts run in one direction, the deeper the folds of a neural pathway become. New thoughts want to adhere to the carved pathway because it's the easiest way to go. The pathway didn't form overnight, and that's great news because it gives educators a formula to follow to help kids form new neural pathways. With time, safe environmental stimuli, and reinforcement we can help children form new, positive pathways. Neuroplasticity shows that the brain can adapt and change. With the right tools, we can help students learn they can move from surviving to thriving. We just need to differentiate safety needs the same way we differentiate instruction—by identifying students who may require more scaffolding to feel safe.

Children with trauma may take longer to feel safe because their brains have dug out a neural pathway of survival reactions to keep them safe.

It's important to take the time to look for trauma. It's also important to note that there are varying degrees of trauma, from ACEs to acute traumas that stem from a negative event such as a sickness. Regardless of the degree of trauma, *all* trauma affects the brain. Figure 2.1 provides a list of some of the ways trauma presents in a child. For example, one child might show trauma through behavior or impulse control, whereas another child's trauma might manifest through distrust and not forming supportive relationships. It's important to remember that not all kids will show all these signs; some will show very few, and some will show no signs at all.

It's also important to note that having signs of possible trauma does not mean trauma has occurred. It's not up to teachers to diagnose trauma but to be aware of how to work with kids who may present signs indicating trauma. The goal is for us as teachers to create an environment that fosters healing so students can grow and thrive.

The most important healing tool at our disposal is . . . us. You and me. We can offer one of the strongest and most long-lasting protective factors for a student: a positive relationship. Once a student trusts in the safety of the classroom they will begin to reach out, and it's our job to be there when they do. Positive relationships have the power to expedite healing and can diminish the long-term mental and health impacts of trauma.<sup>2</sup> Plus, building a relationship that helps a student enjoy school can help a student remain resilient, even during traumatic experiences.<sup>3</sup> The connections we build are a game-changer for fostering healing.

**Positive relationships have the power to expedite healing and can diminish the long-term mental and health impacts of trauma.**

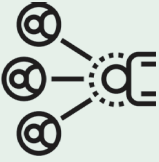




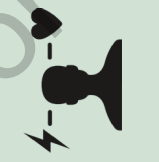

It's important to note that forming relationships with those who have experienced trauma isn't easy. Once a teacher becomes a "safe relationship" they will at times bear the brunt of anger, mixed emotions, and mistrust from the traumatized person as that person processes emotions and situations to heal. It's easy to see reactions and behaviors in a negative light, but it's important to not devalue response skills a person has learned to survive. In some parts of their life, certain behaviors and skills may have kept this student alive. We need to honor rather than judge that. That's why it's imperative educators take an asset-based approach with behaviors, discipline, and relationships.<sup>4</sup>

## **SAFETY FIRST**

Creating a safe environment is like lowering a first aid kit into the pit of trauma. It won't fix the pain from the fall, but it's a start to healing and hope.<sup>5</sup> It's tempting to jump in the pit and help from within, sidestepping safety to form a bond. Helping someone in pain by joining them in their pit helps *no one*. I made this mistake by trying immediately to form a bond with my children over commonalities and to make connections. My teacher's brain told me relationships should come first. It's what good teachers do. I asked them about their interests, but they refused to talk. I tried to play games and they would sit and stare at me. I would

**FIGURE 2.1** WARNING SIGNS OF TRAUMA

**WARNING SIGNS OF POSSIBLE TRAUMA**

 <p><b>Attachments and Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship problems with family, adults, and peers</li> <li>Problems with attachment and separation from caregivers</li> <li>Distrust</li> <li>Social isolation</li> <li>Difficulty relating to others perspectives</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Self Concept &amp; Future Orientation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative body image</li> <li>Low self-esteem</li> <li>Shame and guilt</li> <li>Negative expectations of the future or foreshortened sense of future</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Physical Health: Body &amp; Brain</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensory motor development problems</li> <li>Developmental delays/regressive behavior</li> <li>Trouble concentrating</li> <li>Inability to feel pain</li> <li>Somatization-production of recurrent medical symptoms with no discernible natural cause</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Thinking and Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty with executive function and attention</li> <li>Lack of sustained curiosity</li> <li>Problems with information processing</li> <li>Problems focusing on and completing tasks</li> <li>Difficulties with planning and problem solving</li> <li>Negative self-talk</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Emotional Responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty with emotional self-regulation</li> <li>Difficulty labeling and expressing feelings</li> <li>Problems knowing and describing internal states</li> <li>Difficulty communicating wishes and needs</li> <li>Internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, etc.</li> </ul>	 <p><b>Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulties with impulse control</li> <li>Risk-taking behaviors</li> <li>Sleep disturbances</li> <li>Eating disturbances</li> <li>Oppositional behavior/difficulty with rules</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Dissociation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disconnection between thoughts, emotions, and/or perceptions</li> <li>Memory lapses/loss of orientation of place or time</li> <li>Depersonalization — a sense of not being in "one's body"</li> <li>Derealization — a sense that experiences are not real</li> </ul>	

SOURCE: Adapted from Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., Cloitre, M., DeRosa, R., Hubbard, R., Kagan, R., Liataud, J., Mallah, K., Olafson, E., & Van der Kolk, B. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Annals*, 35(5), 390–398. <https://doi.org/10.3928/00485713-20050501-05>

do a normal activity like turn on the television and one would yell or cry. The more I tried to move closer the more they pushed away. You see, relationships are critical, but I forgot the importance of creating safety first. Developing connections in a relationship begins with building a framework of security. Establishing that an environment is safe allows a person to comfortably open up on their own terms and form attachments. A better bond forms when you give the child the chance to drive the bonding process.

Now take those same behaviors and throw them into a classroom of twenty-five students. You ask a question. A student refuses to respond. You attempt to engage them in a lesson and they stare or yell. You attempt to bond as they push you away. I was lucky enough to know my children had a backstory. What if you didn't know? The challenging behaviors of many traumatized people tend to result in controlling and even punitive responses from those who care for them. This storming stage is normal as a traumatized child tries to locate boundaries and test the waters for safety, but instead of being helped in their search for consistency, the kid is written up for defiance and gets labeled a troublemaker.

The reality is we've all used labels. We stick them on jars and file folders to know what's inside, and we stick them on people for the same reason. We point to a kid and label them a behavior problem or a trauma kid. End of discussion. So why do schools do this? Schools use labels to make sure everyone understands what's inside. It's efficient. Schools want to help everyone understand what's going on. Ultimately it's easier to talk about a person than it is to help them. It's easier to discuss a behavior than to address the underlying cause.

If we don't create environments founded on healing we're going to end up doing the same work repeatedly with students and getting the same outcomes. The labels become grave markers for growth. We need to provide a foundational healing environment that allows every person the opportunity to grow and thrive, and that starts with safety.

**We need to provide a foundational healing environment that allows every person the opportunity to grow and thrive, and that starts with safety.**

## **CREATING SAFETY AND THE THREE CS: CONSISTENCY, COMMUNICATION, AND CARE**

To create safety for students we need to make a valiant attempt to listen and respond to the thoughts of every person in our care.<sup>6</sup> When my children arrived, I wanted to have a relationship from the moment they walked in the door. I was unaware of stimuli in the environment that would trigger instability.

The quick way to alleviate possible stressors is to make sure every person has the opportunity to express their needs and concerns as routines, rules, and procedures are developed.

## Consistency: Rules, Procedures, and Routines

Routines and norms offer consistency, which conveys safety and stability. It provides predictability that lets us know what's going to happen and when. When going over rules, routines, and procedures, consider allowing people to ask questions and give input in their creation.

As much as possible, co-creating classroom norms allows all students, including those who have experienced trauma, to have a voice in shaping a space that fosters a sense of safety. Creating rules, routines, and procedures with others provides a sense of security, value, and ownership, which enhances personal safety. It gives the person who might have experienced trauma the chance to bring up concerns and helps avoid recreating triggering situations where students felt like they weren't in control. It can stop potential problems from happening.

**Co-creating classroom norms allows all students, including those who have experienced trauma, to have a voice in shaping a space that fosters a sense of safety.**

This safety practice also begins to foster psychological hope in the brain. Setting a collaborative goal gives students ownership of their environment. The class works together daily to achieve the principles set in their goal. Students get to experience how this collaborative goal works to shape the classroom culture. This reinforces the power of setting goals and future planning. This practice shows students they have power to shape and change the world around them and builds hope as students see how their efforts impact the goal principles and classroom culture.

I like to start off the year by having students agree on the community principles they want to use as a goal to create their ideal classroom environment. Students give input on what attributes should form the foundation for classroom interactions. To get them started I provide them with examples by asking questions. Should we be able to trust each other in the classroom? What is necessary to keep you engaged, happy, and safe? From their individual lists, we create a large list of principles on the board. The students then group similar characteristics until we come up with a list of four or five attributes for the classroom.

Classroom ideals might include trustworthiness, humor, collaboration, and kindness. The class then works together to create one rule that will ensure that each of these ideals is honored. For example, trustworthiness might have a rule that we honor each other by being honest even when it's hard. Humor might have a rule that states we use school-appropriate jokes or puns when suitable to make class lighthearted. Collaboration might have a rule that we work together as a class to accomplish goals and to build comradery. Lastly, kindness could have a rule that states we always try to make others feel welcome by acting in a way that shows respect and caring. This allows students to see that the rules work to form a pathway to the goal of keeping them safe, comfortable, and happy.

Once the rules are created, I print out the principles and rules and give a copy to each member of the class. Each of my six classes creates principles and rules they



will follow. It's important to go over rules and procedures often to remind people of the way to act in certain situations, to show the structures of consistency that are in place, and to convey to students and staff that safety is a priority.

We can't mitigate all stressors, but students are more likely to demonstrate resilience if they know they have a say and the support of a consistent, caring teacher. Even with a good foundation, however, problems may arise. The best thing we can do in any situation is reaffirm safety and take the time to be curious about behaviors. When students do exhibit challenging behaviors, we can reaffirm safety by approaching them in a calm, respectful way. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with you?" and labeling a kid, we should remain curious and shift the question to, "What's happened to you?"

**The best thing we can do in any situation is reaffirm safety and take the time to be curious about behaviors.**

My own children kept huddling together in my home. Instead of becoming full of frustration, I asked them questions about the huddling behavior. My oldest son, C. J., later told me that huddle-hugging made them feel safe. I continued asking questions and found out they would group together to prevent severe injury. In the past, their father would isolate one of them to abuse, and they knew if they ran and hugged each other he might still hurt them, but not as much as if they were alone. They shared the pain. My children found safety in the clinging hands of their siblings, so when they arrived at my house they clung to each other not to snub their new life but because they wanted safety. This learned behavior was a way to self-soothe and find security during a gigantic change.

Change is hard, but it's even more difficult for those with trauma.<sup>7</sup> Even though my children were in a safe environment, their brains and bodies did not recognize that there was no danger. Consistency over time helps soothe the brain and gives comfort. After a few weeks of following the same routine, listening to my kids, and setting principles for the household environment, my children started to smile, play, and laugh. Your consistent words and actions matter beyond measure!

### **Communication: Mental Health Check-In**

How do you handle your bad days, when hope is a distant star and "Happy" is just a song blaring from a radio? When you are exhausted, stressed, and just don't want to try?

You might play video games or read a book. Perhaps you distract yourself with the Internet, YouTube, or Netflix. A jog in the park might make you feel better. We have ways to cope, but do they solve the problem? They numb the pain, but do they remove it?

Coping mechanisms might get you through a tough spot, but it takes more to help foster healing. According to a study done by Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser, "Simply talking about our problems and sharing our negative emotions with someone we trust can be profoundly healing—reducing stress, strengthening our immune system, and reducing physical and emotional distress."<sup>8</sup>

We need to talk more about mental well-being because a lack of communication will block us and stop us from forming connections. Communication helps people deal, heal, and cope with hurts. It also allows us to show students new ways to channel their feelings.

According to a study done by Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser, “Simply talking about our problems and sharing our negative emotions with someone we trust can be profoundly healing—reducing stress, strengthening our immune system, and reducing physical and emotional distress.”

It’s important to have numerous opportunities for every person to check in and communicate their mental state. Each chance creates a net to catch, respond to, and assist in healing hurts as they arise. Mental health communication can be done in numerous ways in the classroom and school setting. Teachers can create spaces physically or remotely where every student can check in. Communication allows teachers to gain insight into student safety concerns, feedback, and traumas.

**FIGURE 2.2 MENTAL HEALTH CHECK-IN FORM**

The image shows a digital form titled "Mental Health Check-In". At the top, there is a header image of a galaxy. Below the image, the title "Mental Health Check-In" is displayed, followed by the subtitle "I care about you and just want to see how you are doing today." The form contains several sections: a required field for email, a required field for name, a text input field for "What's one good thing about today?", a radio button selection for "How are you today?" with options: "I'm great!", "I'm surviving", "I'm struggling", "I'm having a hard time", "I'm having a hard time and would like a check in", and "I'm in a really dark place". Below this is another text input field for "Do you need anything?". At the bottom of the form are "Submit" and "Clear form" buttons.

Consider creating a check-in using a Google Form that asks first about a positive part of a student's day. Then inquire specifically about the student's mental state. Using multiple-choice answers can help students feel less intimidated to complete the check-in. Offer choices such as "I'm great," "I'm OK," "I'm struggling," or "I'm having a hard time and would like a check-in." For younger students, consider using happy/sad faces that show varying degrees of emotion from happy to upset. Use an open-ended question to ask if the student has particular needs that can be addressed. You can make a copy of the Google Form I use with my students (displayed on the previous page) by going to <https://forms.gle/QTxXSNn4Lr9fqQ2H8>. Pass out the link, post it in a digital classroom, or create a QR code for students to scan to allow easy access. Provide a few minutes for students to fill out the chart at the start of class. Quickly scan the results for any people in need of a physical check-in and follow up.

The greatest thing of value in a school is the people. Taking the time to check in and help others shows people that they matter. It allows safety to bloom and alleviates fear. Having open conversations about mental health promotes a school culture of mental wellness. Trauma can touch anyone at any time, but with open communication we can be there when it does.

**Having open conversations about mental health promotes a school culture of mental wellness.**

### **Care: Self-Care Plans and Asset-Based Teaching**

When trauma shows up it arrives like an earthquake, which can wreck consistency. Even when it stops, aftershocks occur. Stressful moments are the breeding place of rash decisions. Why? Because without proper planning, we react to the moment. The reality is that over time acute traumas touch all of us: death, sickness, accidents, divorce, and natural disasters, to name a few. Schools prepare and run drills for shootings, fires, and tornados. In California, they even build schools with the knowledge that earthquakes may happen. Addressing mental wellness is just as important as preparing for a fire. It's important to have tools at our disposal to provide care for those we serve. In order to do that, we need to plan for bad days and moments of emotional turmoil.<sup>9</sup>

A self-care plan is an intervention that keeps a person from being completely sucked into an emotional reaction. It can give a sense of control and safety during escalating feelings. Having a self-care plan is like earthquake-proofing a building. It won't stop the earthquake when it hits, but it will give a person a choice in how to respond. Each person creates his or her own self-care plan. It's a preventative measure filled with their favorite self-care activities, self-regulation tools, and ideas for how to utilize the people who support them.

**A self-care plan is an intervention that keeps a person from being completely sucked into an emotional reaction. It can give a sense of control and safety during escalating feelings.**

Having a plan takes the guesswork out of what to do and where to turn in a moment of crisis. It helps a person respond instead of react to the situation at hand. It allows them to take time to think about what they want to do and how they want to do it. You can write your own self-care plan and get students to do the same. Having students create individual plans gives teachers tools to support students who show signs of distress and provides teachers with strategies, activities, and tools to help each student.

For example, Jordan struggled with feelings about her dad going back to prison. In her plan, she wrote that her dad being in and out of her life was a stressor and sometimes caused her to shut down. I knew from her self-care plan that I was an adult she relied on and that art was a tool she used to feel better, so after she finished talking, I suggested she take a few minutes to draw when she went back to the classroom. By taking those few minutes, she was able to find a safe space to deal with her feelings. Creating plans with students allows them to utilize their own neuroplasticity to reshape a moment of chaos into one of control.

**Creating plans with students allows them to utilize their own neuroplasticity to reshape a moment of chaos into one of control.**

To begin a self-care plan with a student, have them recognize support structures, people, and hobbies that help them feel better. Start by asking the student to list activities that they currently utilize to help them feel calm or happy. It's best to model an example plan to students as they create their own. I have each of my students fill out this Google Doc when they are creating their plan: <https://rb.gy/lcie3x>

To model, I go through the self-care plan and fill one out for myself. I go through it step by step and explain out loud my thought process for each part. For calming activities, I give students suggestions of activities such as music, exercise, coloring, art, meditation, etc. Next, I have them list one or two people whom they can turn to for help and support. In the same section, they should write down what resources they have access to in the school building. For example, if your school has a school counselor or a focus and recovery (FAR) room, students can utilize those. By writing this list, the student can take mental stock of tools at their disposal in times of turmoil.

Once students complete the support section, they should list stressors or things that might act as a speedbump to their mental well-being. This section will serve as a guide for moments when you might utilize a student's self-care plan. Thinking through a typical school day or school year might help them hone in on specific areas of stress, such as transitions between classes, a specific time of year, or perhaps a situation like a fire drill. Then they should list barriers outside of school that might affect their mental well-being. Lastly, they should create a plan to address each of the stressors and barriers. They can use tools from their feel-good activity list or other strategies they might

**FIGURE 2.3 MY DAILY SELF-CARE PLAN**

<b>MY DAILY SELF-CARE PLAN</b>				
<b>BODY</b>	<b>MIND</b>	<b>SOCIAL</b>	<b>EMOTIONS</b>	<b>SCHOOL/ WORK</b>

<b>MY TOP THREE POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES.</b>	<b>STRESSORS OR PROBLEMS I HAVE RIGHT NOW.</b>	<b>HOW COULD I IMPROVE THE PROBLEM OR DECREASE THE STRESS?</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		

<b>MY EMERGENCY CARE SELF-CARE PLAN</b>	
<b>LIST YOUR TOP FIVE EMERGENCY SELF-CARE PRACTICES.</b>	<b>MAKE A LIST OF THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU AND PEOPLE AT SCHOOL/IN THE COMMUNITY TO WHOM YOU CAN TURN FOR HELP.</b>
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

want to try. Have them list what they could do to cope when they start to feel overwhelmed.

Remind students that they can use their self-care plan even when they are not in your class. They can revise and use it at their discretion as new barriers appear, new coping tools are learned, and new life circumstances arise. That way the next time an earth-shaking moment hits them, they'll have a plan, and it might be just enough to keep their world from crumbling.

## ASSET-BASED EDUCATION

An asset-based approach helps build students up and offers them healing by focusing on their strengths, not on what they lack. This approach is vital in fostering healing. Why? Our relationships show us how we should see the world, and they show us how we should view ourselves in the context of others. Trauma can be isolating, and depending on the type of trauma, it can lower a person's self-worth.<sup>10</sup> In order to create strong attachments, people who experience trauma need to feel secure and have a sense of self-worth. Sadly, education typically takes a deficit-based approach, highlighting students' weaknesses. Students get grouped by what they are *not* good at. Low in math. A behavior problem. No social skills. This context does not value a student nor build up self-worth. In this context, a student will learn to view themselves by what they lack. There is nothing in that situation for a child to cling to and learn from. I honor that we do need to help children with areas of weakness, but they need a strength-based environment in which to grow.

**Our relationships show us how we should see the world, and they show us how we should view ourselves in the context of others.**

A former student taught me a Zulu greeting that truly symbolizes the daily goal of asset-based teaching with students: "*Sawubona*." The greeting means "I see you, you are important to me, and I value you." It's based on the idea of constantly looking at a person with fresh eyes and without grudges, prejudice, and bias. The greeting serves as a reminder that every time we see a person, we should interact with them with appreciation and understanding. Some days student behaviors and actions may cloud our thoughts with negativity. That's why it's important to hold on to the idea of *sawubona* and seek to see past individual moments to discover the worth a person brings with them. It's a reminder that every life brings value to the world.

For example, if a flower lacks blooms and is wilting, we don't attempt to fix the flower. We don't focus on the lack of blooms. The first reaction is to try to fix the environment the flower grows in. Water the flower. Move it to better light. We try to help the flower gain strength. We need to do the same for students. We can't "fix" a person, but we can give them a foundation to thrive. With an asset-based approach, diversity in thought, culture, and traits are seen as positive assets. A person is valued for what they bring to school rather than being designated by

what they lack or need to work on. An asset-based approach seeks to unlock student potential by focusing on talents.

**An asset-based approach seeks to unlock student potential by focusing on talents.**

## **UNDERSTANDING AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS**

It has to be said that understanding takes time and patience. We should not seek to force students to give us information. That devalues them. Understanding means a person tells their story, but only when they're ready. If a child has experienced trauma and we are aware of it, we should not focus on it. We don't want to cause a student to re-experience the trauma. We need to allow students to open up when they're ready. And while we wait, we need to provide a classroom environment that helps kids see the assets they bring with them.

One way to gain understanding, show students the assets they contain, and build relationships is through personal connections. We need to create learning tasks that validate students by incorporating their experiences, interests, passions, ethnicity, and culture. Give each student voice, choice, and an opportunity for personal connection.

**We need to create learning tasks that validate students by incorporating their experiences, interests, passions, ethnicity, and culture.**

To incorporate personal connections in the classroom, a teacher needs to look at the skill or objective and then think, "How can I bring in student experiences, beliefs, cultures, or personal identities into this lesson?" For example, a math educator who is teaching fractions might have students bring in a recipe of their favorite home-cooked food. Students could share why they chose their recipe, bits about the dish, the cultural connection for them, or the recipe's personal meaning. After, they could manipulate the recipe to feed ten people. They would be adding fractions in the recipe to equal a new serving size. You could even create a class cookbook that each student could take home. Adding personal connections helps build class community and connections by highlighting the beautiful diversity in the classroom.

Using this lens also allows students to form connections. As students share tidbits of information, it builds comradery and community through the sharing of personal identity. It helps students who carry trauma focus on their value.

## USING ASSETS FOR MOMENTS OF STRUGGLE

Let's say a student takes something from another student. A teacher might respond, "We don't take things. That's bad." The problem with this response is that it shames the student. What if the student had to steal food to survive? We don't want to shame students and push them away from connecting with us and the classroom community. Instead, we can take a more asset-based approach. In that same situation, the teacher could state an objective observation: "I see you took something from another student. Why?" Notice there is no judgment. The teacher stays objective and allows the student to explain their rationale. At the same time, it gives the teacher a chance to reinforce expectations set forth in the class community. We as teachers need to find ways to respond to behaviors that honor the student's background and allow the student a chance to help us understand them and see where they are coming from.

**We as teachers need to find ways to respond to behaviors that honor the student's background and allow the student a chance to help us understand them and see where they are coming from.**

It also helps us gain tools to support students after discipline. In the above situation, the teacher might remind students to borrow supplies if needed, which will alleviate fear in the child who feels they don't have enough. A person with trauma who is learning new skills and forming new neural pathways is going to mess up and make mistakes. They are also going to need more support after a setback.

## RESTORATIVE ASSET-BASED REINTEGRATION

Jordan was sensitive about her father possibly going to prison. A fellow student found out about her worries and chose to make fun of her. Without thinking, Jordan hit the other student and ended up out of school for a few days. This wasn't a matter of right or wrong, it was a matter of helping her keep her self-worth, assets, and values after a corrective moment. It's important to remind the student of their value to the classroom community upon their return. That way they associate the moment of discipline as a lapse in judgment and don't internalize shame and guilt.

There are two tools I use for positive asset-based reintegration to the classroom and classroom community support. Before Jordan returned to my class, I made it a point to list some of the positive assets she brought to the classroom. It's important to utilize this list to reinforce to the student their assets before they return to the classroom. You can call the student's home before they return, e-mail them, or give them a letter as they enter the door of the classroom. I usually start with "I value you in the classroom community for your . . ." and list five or six attributes that are as specific or as broad as you want, such as artistic nature, kindness to others, humor, sharing of their colored pencils, or love of enchiladas. This



small gesture is a positive primer to help the student successfully return and integrate back into the community after a mishap.

In another activity, I have students write their name on the top of a sheet of paper and leave it on their desks. Students switch desks and write one reason they value the student and sign their name. I let students read their lists when finished and then I collect them. I use a student's sheet upon reintegration or before a stressful moment such as a test to serve as a reminder to the student of their value to the class community. This enhances the student's sense of belonging and provides a reminder to the student that the class community doesn't see them for their mistakes or how they perform, but for who they are.

Asset-based education is a long-term fix that takes time, patience, and understanding. It creates a school culture of mutual respect and belonging. The asset-based approach seeks to build students up. It shows we believe in students, and that's important. If we believe in students, they'll learn to believe in themselves.

**Asset-based education is a long-term fix that takes time, patience, and understanding.**

## **SAFETY AND HEALING**

Creating a healing environment that promotes safety is imperative for schools. When a child feels safe it is a protective factor for them. It makes a shield for every student to carry against the stressful situations of the world.<sup>11</sup> It raises resilience. It's a game-changer—for all kids.

Creating protective factors such as safety changes the weighted impact of trauma. That's one of the reasons this book starts with forming schools and classrooms that promote healing. Utilizing multiple protective factors equips our students with resources—resources they can use to heal from trauma and safeguard themselves. That's why it's important to create schools that focus on practices and daily methods that foster healing.

**Utilizing multiple protective factors equips our students with resources—resources they can use to heal from trauma and safeguard themselves.**



# HEART TO HEART

## QUESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR ACTION

*Reflect, discuss with a group, or share your thoughts and create a dialogue on social media using the book's hashtag, #HOPEforEdu.*

### Questions

1. The list of warning signs of trauma is an important guide for identifying possible trauma. Who may need to know these warning signs? Why would it be important for them to know? How would providing a list of warning signs help teachers in a classroom?
2. Safety is the first step in helping those with trauma. What do you currently do in your own classroom, school, or organization to make people feel safe? What's something you could do better or more of to increase mental safety?

### Ideas for Action

- Write a self-care plan and stick to it. If we want our students to follow one, we have to model what it looks like. Make sure to schedule time for yourself, your family, and the activities you love in your day-to-day life. If you put it on your calendar, you will make time for simple activities that can revitalize you and keep your mind at its best to help those in your care.

## HEALING AND RESILIENCE

When someone experiences trauma, their sympathetic nervous system (SNS) goes on high alert, looking for threats. When you perceive a threat, your body responds to either neutralize or move away from this perceived threat. If we are truly in danger of losing our lives, this reflex is useful. However, most daily interactions are not dangerous but may be perceived as such by an overactive SNS. No matter the danger, when a person's mind perceives a threat (dire or not), their SNS activates and prepares to do battle or run from situations, people, or the safety of a classroom. Overactivity of the SNS is the cause of a lot of stress, anxiety, and reactivity.<sup>12</sup> Soothing the SNS with coping tools is the solution, which makes me think of Zoe.

Zoe was a student who had been through a lot in a few months' time. Her mother lost custody of her due to neglect, and she moved to live with her grandmother, leaving her friends and former life behind. Dad came in and out of the picture at will and separated her from her baby brother. Within minutes of walking into class on the first day, Zoe was sitting with her arms crossed over her chest. I welcomed students and began a small get-to-know you activity, asking basic questions about interests, family, and life. After reading the start of the sheet, Zoe got up, shoved her desk aside, and left the room. I stood stunned with twenty-five young faces staring at me. Immediately I called a fellow teacher to cover my room while I went and found Zoe.

She was huddled on the floor of the girl's bathroom, sobbing. I knew she was in the waves of feeling her SNS overwhelm her. Before I adopted my children, I might have pitied her and just wanted to get her back to class. People with trauma don't need pity or rescuing. As a teacher, you don't need to walk a mile in your student's shoes, but you do need to help them realize that in those shoes they can walk further and do more, and that they have more power than they ever realized. They need tools to cope while healing.

Plus, if I were to step in and regulate Zoe's mood, she would come to rely on me to be a source of regulation. I didn't want to teach her learned helplessness. I wanted to model tools she could take with her. A person who becomes skilled in making the transition from distress to calm has developed internal control and is no longer a victim to circumstances. So instead of pitying her I began to teach her tools to fill in the GAP: grounding, analyzing, and progress building.

**A person who becomes skilled in making the transition from distress to calm has developed internal control and is no longer a victim to circumstances.**

### Grounding

Grounding is a practice that can help a person in distress pull away from flashbacks, negative self-talk, bad memories, and difficult emotions. Grounding allows the brain to refocus on the present moment and provides an opportunity to shift

from the fight–flight–freeze SNS to the relaxed learning brain or parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Grounding can help those with trauma, anxiety, or PTSD.<sup>13</sup> It's a great tool for giving a person a sense of control over their reactions. Teaching a couple of grounding techniques to your class benefits all kids. A lot of the grounding techniques I show students end up in their emergency self-care plans.

**Grounding is a practice that can help a person in distress pull away from flashbacks, negative self-talk, bad memories, and difficult emotions.**

As Zoe sat sobbing on the bathroom floor, I decided to use the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding method with her. This method has a person use their five senses to ground themselves in the present moment and is easy to teach and use. Simply, it's identifying five things that can be seen, four things that can be felt, three things that can be heard, two things that can be smelled, and one thing that can be tasted.

"Zoe, look at the floor, it's such a pretty blue. Can you tell me four other things you see from down there?"

Her sobs slowed and she began to look around. "Well, umm . . . the bottoms of white toilets?"

"Great, Zoe! Keep going."

The sobs stopped and she began to peer around the room intently. "There are also silver pipes, black paper towel holders, and rectangular, shiny, reflective mirrors."

"Wonderful descriptions, Zoe. Now can you tell me four things you are touching or feeling?"

She sat up and looked to the floor. "I feel the smooth floor and its bumps. I also feel fuzzy socks on my feet. Oh, and I feel the bracelet and watch dangling on my arm."

"Zoe, what about three things you hear?"

She slowed her breath further and looked around to listen. "I hear the drip of the faucet, the hum of the lights, and my voice echoing. You know what's weird? I don't feel like I did when I came in here. Can we go back to class? I just didn't want to do that sheet because I don't see eye-to-eye with my family right now."

I nodded. As we walked, I explained grounding exercises and their purpose and told her that grounding is a way to relax so a person can self-regulate in order to think. I went over the full 5-4-3-2-1 technique and told her to use it any time she felt big emotions. Now Zoe had a new tool in her mental toolbox to cope.

There are two main types of grounding techniques: mental and physical. It's best to showcase both to students early in the year and take one or two minutes a month to remind students of a couple of the techniques. Encourage them to use whatever techniques they are comfortable with and that fit the situation they



are in. Generally, if a student is doing a physical activity, a cognitive technique is best, and if a student is doing a cognitive activity, a physical technique is best. For example, I tell my students that if they are about to take a big test, they might consider doing the physical breathing exercises so they don't get distracted while trying to think. Likewise, if they are about to run a big race it might be best to do a cognitive activity that will not disrupt a physical warm-up or exercise they are doing to prepare. Schools can showcase these techniques through morning announcements and posters to remind students that grounding is a tool to help them during moments of struggle. Figure 2.4 presents a list of other mental and physical grounding techniques that can be taught to and used by students.

**FIGURE 2.4 GROUNDING TECHNIQUES**

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL

### GROUNDING TECHNIQUES TO HELP A PERSON SOOTHE AND COPE

ADAPTED FROM GROUNDING TECHNIQUES AT: [HTTPS://WWW.THERAPISTAID.COM/WORKSHEETS/GROUNDING-TECHNIQUES.PDF](https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/grounding-techniques.pdf)

 <b>PHYSICAL</b>	 <b>MENTAL</b>
<p>Take five long, deep breaths through your nose and exhale through your lips.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>	<p>Describe the steps in performing an activity you know how to do well.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>
<p>Clench your hands into fists, then release the tension. Repeat this ten times.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>	<p>Read something backwards, letter by letter. Practice for at least a few minutes.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>
<p>Reach your hands over your head like you're trying to reach the sky. Stretch like this for five seconds. Bring your arms down and let them relax at your sides.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>	<p>Pick up an object and describe it in detail. Describe its color, texture, size, weight, scent, and any other qualities you notice. Also, list all the ways the object can be used.</p> <hr style="border: 1px solid white;"/>
<p>Place both feet flat on the floor. Wiggle your toes. Curl and uncurl your toes several times. Spend a moment noticing the sensations in your feet.</p>	<p>Think of an object and "draw" it in your mind, or in the air with your finger. Try drawing your home, a vehicle, or an animal.</p>

SOURCE: Adapted from Therapist Aid. (2018). *Grounding techniques*. <https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/grounding-techniques.pdf>

## ANALYZING AND PROGRESS BUILDING

Grounding is a great way to start helping students gain autonomy over their mental well-being. Once a person has strategies to cope with emotional triggers, it's important to figure out what prompts reactions in the first place. Analyzing allows a student to step back and observe their own behaviors reflectively and to figure out what triggers them, what their patterns of behavior are, and how to employ preventative measures detached from the moment of emotion.

**Analyzing allows a student to step back and observe their own behaviors reflectively and to figure out what triggers them, what their patterns of behavior are, and how to employ preventative measures detached from the moment of emotion.**

Analyzing should be done over the course of a few days to a week. It can be done through journaling (on paper or through video), by checking in with a student for a few minutes at the end of a school day, or by giving a student a sheet to track their reactions. No matter the method you choose, it's your job to help the student look objectively at their day to find patterns and triggers.

Zoe needed to know when to apply her newfound grounding tools. She understood from the bathroom incident that she could use grounding when she felt like she was going to “blow up.” It's important to teach that any overwhelming feeling is a chance to use coping tools. Every student should have the power to use analyzing behaviors to increase their well-being. Over the course of the third or fourth week of school, I have all my students use the sheet presented in Figure 2.5.

Students reflect at the end of a day on the things that caused big emotions for them. First, they go back and recall where and about when the big emotion occurred. They try to pinpoint what caused the emotion to happen. Then they explain how they responded to the emotion. What did they do because of feeling that emotion? Next, they look to see if any patterns existed in their behaviors that day or over the course of several days. What did the behaviors have in common? Did a certain action or event cause them? Lastly, if they notice any patterns, trends, or repeated behaviors, they list possible preventative measures.

I gave Zoe this sheet to complete a week before I introduced analyzing to all my students. She noticed that whenever her friends or teachers started asking about family it made her feel angry and tense. She didn't react, but it still caused distress. The preventative measure she came up with was “politely ask my teachers and friends to not ask me about my family life and explain to them it will upset me.” She implemented the plan. Later, she told me that she felt better than ever because people were not constantly bringing up family questions. Zoe also

**FIGURE 2.5 TRIGGER, RESPONSE, PATTERNS, AND PREVENTION**

**ANALYZING MY WEEK**

Fill out this analysis daily for a week. If you have no big emotions or triggers, leave it blank.

WHEN AND WHERE	TRIGGER	RESPONSE	PATTERNS	PREVENTION
Write when, where, and the time a big emotion occurred.	List any event that triggers a big emotion or behavioral response.	How did you respond? Did you exhibit a specific behavior?	Do you notice any patterns, trends, or habits? What are they?	Is there anything you could do in the future to prevent a negative trigger from happening?
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				

realized while doing this that waiting until the day before a test to study caused her extreme anxiety. Her preventative measure? To study her notes every night to avoid anxiety. Analyzing allowed her to see the behaviors and triggers without emotion.

Students should be encouraged to come up with academic goals before major assignments and personal goals that will help them get there. More specific resources on goals and goal setting are found in the next chapter, but a key part of goal setting is making sure students track their progress. By having them set and use goals for their problems you are introducing a foundational component to hope. This small practice puts the student in control and helps them realize they have the power to shape who they become.

**Students should be encouraged to come up with academic goals before major assignments and personal goals that will help them get there.**

As students come up with goals it's important to use progress building as they reach for those goals. It's the last but one of the most important parts to help students cope and heal. Changing behaviors and habits and strengthening new neural pathways takes time. Healing is not an endpoint, but a journey. We all want instant results, but the reality is real work takes time. That's why it's important students constantly look at how far they've progressed to gain intrinsic motivation to keep going. As Zoe set goals, I gave her a progress sheet to keep track of her progress. Progress charting helps students see how small changes can have a big impact on their well-being and positively reinforces the small wins in a big habit or behavior change. It allows the student to see they have control of their life and can change it.

**Progress charting helps students see how small changes can have a big impact on their well-being and positively reinforces the small wins in a big habit or behavior change.**

Progress tracking can be done with the help of a teacher, by a student on their own digitally, or on a copied sheet of paper. I use the progress chart in Figure 2.6. Students use one sheet to state their goal, make plans to implement that goal, and track milestones. They also have a "help" section for problem solving. If a student gets stuck, I suggest they seek help from me or a fellow peer. They keep the sheet and track their goal until they have reached whatever measurable target they set for themselves. I ask my students to let me know their progress so I can celebrate their "small wins" with them. These little celebrations open the door to building positive connections with students.



**FIGURE 2.6 GOAL PROGRESS**

**BEHAVIOR AND HABIT GOAL PROGRESS**

**Goal:** State your goal.

**Getting there:** How will you get there? What are measurable and attainable mini-goals?

<b>Tasks:</b>	<b>Target Dates:</b>

**Milestones:** List any big moment of success and how it made you feel.

<b>Milestones:</b>	<b>Feeling and reaction to milestones:</b>

**Plan if I need help or I get stuck:**



# HEART TO HEART

## QUESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR ACTION

*Reflect, discuss with a group, or share your thoughts and create a dialogue on social media using the book's hashtag, #HOPEforEdu.*

### Questions

1. Coping doesn't erase pain, but it helps the person get through a moment. It's important to have students share their coping tools so staff can support them. Coping strategies may take a few minutes, so it's important staff recognizes this and allows the student the necessary time to regulate. What are the ways your school or grade level supports students trying to cope?
2. Behavior and habit change can be difficult. It's important to celebrate students through progress building. How can your school, classroom, or grade-level team celebrate or encourage students as they work to improve their personal well-being?

### Ideas for Action

- When someone is identified as experiencing trauma, they need a lot of extra support. What systems, programs, and people can you utilize to provide support for those experiencing trauma? Create a plan of action and support that you can use to provide extra communication, consistency, and control to individuals in need.



# HEART TO HEART

## QUESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR ACTION

*Reflect, discuss with a group, or share your thoughts and create a dialogue on social media using the book's hashtag, #HOPEforEdu.*

### Questions

1. Peer connections are vital to supporting healing. Strong classroom communities help heal and foster student connections. What can you do to support community building outside of providing classroom lessons that are asset based?
2. As students heal from trauma, they may act out with you more because they feel secure in their relationship with you. What classroom or school community principles can you use to set guidelines and parameters for students with trauma?

### Ideas for Action

- Asset-based education starts with looking at the language we use with students. People naturally have a built-in negativity bias. That sometimes comes across in the language, documents, and activities we use with students. For a single class period or over the course of a day, chart the amount of negative versus positive language you use. Then make a goal to increase the positive. The more intentional we are, the more supportive our classroom environment becomes.

## Compassion for Colleagues

### Healing: Supporting School Staff

It's easy to get overwhelmed by students' struggles. According to the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, "34 million children ages 0–17—nearly half of all US children—had at least one of nine ACEs, and more than 20 percent had two or more."<sup>1</sup> Add on top of that other forms of trauma people may experience, such as natural disasters, bullying, and medical trauma. This reveals two certainties: We will deal with a lot of kids who carry trauma, and a vast majority of staff members have probably experienced trauma too. In addition, working day in and day out with students in pain takes a toll. After struggling with worry for your students, dealing with daily reminders of the problems facing them, and feeling an overwhelming desire to support and relieve them all, some educators begin to suffer symptoms of compassion fatigue. If left unchecked this condition can rob classrooms and schools of amazing educators. My goal in this section is to help you find ways to implement concepts from each chapter to help yourself and your colleagues avoid burnout and a feeling of just surviving. We want to help our students with mental wellness, and to do that we have to model school cultures of mental wellness.

**We want to help our students with mental wellness, and to do that we have to model school cultures of mental wellness.**

The first step in promoting a culture of mental wellness is knowing how to recognize when you or a colleague may need help. With adults, symptoms of trauma or compassion fatigue may look different, and we may not even know we need help. For example, when I started caring for my new children, I went to school in a dazed state. It was hard to deal with my kids' stories of abuse and neglect and then go to school and help more students with pain and trauma. I stuck to lesson plans like a map and checked out mentally from the classroom. I listed objectives, followed procedures, graded papers, and slowly stopped caring. Overwhelmed, I sunk into my classroom walls of isolation and exhaustion. My health deteriorated and I blamed it on not being a good enough teacher. During one of my kid's therapy appointments, the mental health provider pointed out that I did not look well. On the spot, I told the therapist the entire story of how I had been feeling: I felt drained, I wanted to sleep to numb the sense of being overwhelmed, and I felt empty and thought I wasn't cut out for teaching. That's when I discovered compassion fatigue. Whereas students might overtly act out, staff members experiencing trauma or compassion fatigue more often than not experience symptoms associated with physical and emotional exhaustion.<sup>2</sup> Below is a list of various signs of adult trauma and compassion fatigue.

**Whereas students might overtly act out, staff members experiencing trauma or compassion fatigue more often than not experience symptoms associated with physical and emotional exhaustion.**

## Signs of Adult Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

- Anxiety, fear, and worry about their and others' safety
- Worry about recurrence or consequences of violence
- Changes in behavior
- Withdrawal from others or activities
- Absenteeism
- Increase in impulsivity, risk-taking behavior
- Discomfort with feelings (such as troubling thoughts of revenge)
- Increased irritability or impatience with students
- Difficulty planning classroom activities and lessons
- Decreased concentration
- Denying that traumatic events impact students or feeling numb or detached
- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts that doesn't lessen over time about a student's trauma

According to the American Institute of Stress, "Compassion fatigue also called 'vicarious traumatization' or secondary traumatization is the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events."<sup>3</sup> Most of us went into education because of a deep compassion for humanity. You care deeply, and when others hurt, you step up to give. Compassion makes us feel a need to sacrifice, but there comes a point in which we can overwhelm our emotional and physical health. Caring too much can hurt.

**Compassion makes us feel a need to sacrifice, but there comes a point in which we can overwhelm our emotional and physical health.**

We can't pour from empty cups, but often teachers and administrators feel the need to give until they can't. Mustafa Ataturk once said, "A good teacher is like a candle—it consumes itself to light the way for others." This quote is a perfect example of how compassion makes us feel the need to self-sacrifice until we are no more. However, for those of you thinking this is a noble pursuit, let me put it this way: You help more people when you're at your best. A full tank of gas goes farther than an empty tank. Staff members with trauma and compassion fatigue can't work as effectively, and that means that the school will not work as productively. A brain in pain works overtime and therefore cannot handle the same cognitive load. We don't have to give up our own mental health to light a path for others. It's similar to how on an airplane you are instructed to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. Help yourself to safety and well-being first so you can help others.

**Help yourself to safety and well-being first so you can help others.**

As we help our students, we need to be able to help ourselves and provide support for our colleagues. By taking the time to focus on the mental well-being of staff, we can perpetuate cultures of self-care and

mental wellness. If we expect students to take care of their own well-being, we as adults must model it in our schools.

### **Communication, Consistency, and Control: Support**

Educators spend much of their time distanced from colleagues. We work in classrooms and offices in which we are often the only adult in a given space. We might get together for meetings and curriculum work, but we need to purposely connect and form support networks for our mental well-being. It's important that you find a professional community of trusted colleagues with whom you can share your stress, hopes, encouragement, and victories.

**It's important that you find a professional community of trusted colleagues with whom you can share your stress, hopes, encouragement, and victories.**

In fact, our brains are hardwired with a need to form communities of social support.<sup>4</sup> Much like educators form professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve their practice it's just as vital that we create professional support communities (PSCs) for mental well-being. This can be done individually or in a whole school setting.

To start forming a PSC you need to look for allies to assist you through difficult times: administrators, school secretaries, custodians, or the teacher next door. Take stock in the supportive relationships that you have in the building. If you have a mentor, grade-level team, or department that acts as a strong support, feel free to list them. Such relationships not only support you but can provide you with pathways and encouragement when you feel overwhelmed.

You can also build systems of communication to help expand personal support into the school network. For example, as a staff, you might implement a simple e-mail system to signify the need for a colleague's help, or staff members might use the door hanger outside of their door if they need someone to check in with them. Colleagues should be encouraged to send an e-mail or use some other method to seek out purposeful interaction with colleagues indicating they want a check-in. Noticing the door hanger or reading the e-mail should prompt others to seek out the staff member who may need a little encouragement or someone to listen.

Principals should walk the building a couple of times a day and provide aid to staff who may need a bit of extra help. Some staff members might be hesitant to use the door hangers, so think about simultaneously starting an e-mail signaling system with the words *mental check-in* as the subject line. Staff could list the reason they need support in the body of the e-mail or leave it blank if overwhelmed. This could help signal staff, administration, and school counselors to check in.

Also, like the students, consider creating your own self-care plan. List activities that make you feel better, your support networks, and the resources that are at your disposal to help in a time of need. Sharing your self-care plan with trusted colleagues ensures that they can assist you further in a time of crisis. Everyone is going to have bad days, but by creating systems of support and self-care, we can get through them together.

**Sharing your self-care plan with trusted colleagues ensures that they can assist you further in a time of crisis.**