

The Connection Cure: Why Educators Need Balance, Laughter, and Community More Than Ever

BY DANIELLE SULLIVAN

How are you feeling today? This might be a question you would ask a student who is struggling. However, given the high teacher burnout rate, the challenges of 2020, and the fact that many educators are just trying to do the best they can, I'll ask again—how are you feeling today? Take a deep breath and really dig in. Maybe you are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, scared, curious, or hopeful. However you are feeling is OK.

Teacher burnout has been a problem for a long time. In their book, *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, authors Emily and Amelia Nagoski cite that 20–30 percent of teachers have moderate to high levels of burnout. Not just the socially distanced, masked, virtual teaching kind of burnout many of us are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, but burnout from a system that hasn't been working for many students and educators for a while.

Not just the socially distanced, masked, virtual teaching kind of burnout many of us are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, but burnout from a system that hasn't been working for many students and educators for a while.

The Nagoskis write that burnout is defined by three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of accomplishment. Does that sound like something you have experienced? Emotional exhaustion happens when we care too much for too long. Depersonalization refers to not having enough empathy and caring for others. Finally, a decreased sense of accomplishment leads to feeling like nothing you do matters. That can be a lot for a teacher, and burnout is not uncommon.

A 2018 study by researchers from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Otto Beisheim School of Management stated that 85 percent of teachers said that work–life imbalance was affecting their ability to teach (Moeller, Ivcevic, White, Menges, & Brackett, 2018, as cited in Cipriano & Brackett, 2020).



Educators have been struggling with stress and burnout for a long time. From high-pressure state testing to trying to keep up with ever-changing educational requirements, burnout and stress are real.

There is good news to all of this: There are things that can help. Current research in the fields of positive psychology, neuroscience, mindset, and human learning potential have given us great insights into how we can create more connection in our schools, classrooms, and lives. This paper breaks down the latest research about emotional well-being and describes activities—many of which are improv comedy exercises—that can help you feel more connected today.

Why am I writing this professional paper? Because I changed my professional and personal trajectory using the concepts and activities that will be laid out in this paper. Once upon a time, I was the burnt-out classroom teacher. I know what it's like to enter a classroom feeling overwhelmed and hopeless, and now my job is to help teachers avoid burnout and feel more connected. What you focus on is what you see. I chose to focus on positivity, changing my mindset, and taking care of myself as a human, and my students, friends, and family were better off for it. In fact, many educators have fundamentally changed by implementing practices that you will read about in this paper. I'll share my story and the stories of others to help you know you are not alone in what you are feeling and to show how the mindsets I describe have had positive impact on educators' lives.

It starts with you, and it starts with a belief that things can get better. Not only can they get better, but we can take the stress and uncertainty we are feeling right now and make meaning from them. Now is the time to start to reinvent the way we take on the work of education so we can create stronger, more connected learning experiences for educators and students. If I was able to turn things around, you can, too! Each day is a new day, so whenever you are reading this, it's time to start.

You ready? How are you feeling?
Great! Let's go!

Self-Care 101

I sat slumped in my chair at my classroom desk, tears of frustration streaming down my face. My classroom looked like a tornado had touched down in its center—chairs misplaced and papers with unsolved math problems strewn about the floor. It was only 2:30 in the afternoon. That meant my students and I still had 30 long, painful minutes until the day was over—30 minutes of me trying to do the impossible: help my students understand four subjects and complete homework while they bickered with one another. Trying to do what I thought was right left me feeling exhausted, defeated, and disconnected.

I did not get into teaching to feel that way day in and day out. Like almost every educator I've ever met, I started teaching because I wanted to help children learn. I became a special education teacher because I was prepared to be the last stand, the educator who swooped in to help students overcome all their doubts, fears, insecurities, and learning disabilities. My responsibilities sat heavily on my shoulders. I only had 30 minutes a day to work with my students. It was never enough time. Hours of planning didn't help, and my stress was impacting my life. This is my story, but I've heard versions of it from many educators.

“85 percent of teachers said that work–life imbalance was affecting their ability to teach.”



If you are feeling like this and not really tuning into what you need, how are you able to teach, parent, coach, be a friend, or show up for your partner at night? Short answer: You can't. Educators struggle A LOT when it comes to taking care of themselves. Why is this? I've heard plenty of reasons. What are yours? Do you believe you need to always focus on helping others? Do you think self-care is selfish or that you don't have the time? Whatever reasons you give aren't enough. Putting off this work needs to stop. You need to make yourself a priority right now.



"We can't practice compassion with other people if we can't treat ourselves kindly."

—Brené Brown

Mindset Matters

Why did you get into education? You might answer along the lines of wanting to help people, be there for children, be the effective teacher you never had, lead a group of teachers to empower students to change the world, etc. What you'll likely find in your answer is the idea that humans want to help other humans learn. A life of service is a very noble pursuit, but it's also very exhausting if you are not taking care of yourself first.

We teach children how to get along, to share, to not bully, and to be kind, but who is teaching us how to stop working when we are stressed—how to breathe and take care of our own mental health so we can continue to do essential work? The only person who is going to take care of YOU is YOU.

In 2017, researchers at the University of Michigan found that 93 percent of teachers experience high job-related stress (Riley, 2018). It is a hard time to be in education. But that doesn't mean that you can't still take care of yourself. In fact, think of this section as your survival guide. The practices described here are what you need to do each day in order to function, and the goal is to not just survive, but thrive. Let's decide right now that you ARE worthy of love and care, and you can give yourself that love and care.



Self-Compassion

Researcher Dr. Kristin Neff (who literally wrote the book on self-compassion, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*), believes that self-compassion is not selfish. Rather, it's an essential component of being human, and being human means it's OK to struggle and we are not alone in that struggle. Neff references three components of self-compassion: self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity.

Let's unpack that. Imagine you are sitting in a staff meeting and you reach for your pen to take notes, and you spill coffee all over the place. You are trying to quietly clean it up, but you end up disrupting the whole meeting. As this is happening, you might be thinking, "I'm so stupid. I never do anything right."



Mindful Breathing

During moments of chaos, stop whatever you are doing and do something kind for yourself. It's easy. All you do is breathe.

Breathing—that thing we think we don't need to think about—can be a lifeline.

Steps

- Notice your body.
- Relax your muscles.
- Close your eyes.
- Bring attention to your breath.
- Inhale deeply and hold for five seconds, then exhale slowly. Repeat five times.
- Ease back into what you were doing before this exercise.
- Have faith. Keep breathing.

I'm a failure." We would never say such terrible things to a friend, so why do we talk to ourselves like that? It's a hard pattern to stop, but the first step is to give yourself permission to be human and to honor that you are worthy of love and care. Neff would advise that in those moments, instead of practicing negative self-talk, you should take a deep breath and give yourself some grace. Now let's reimagine the scenario. You spill your coffee. Maybe you think, "Oops! Everyone makes mistakes. There's more coffee in the staff room." That's what you would tell a student or a colleague, right? You need to speak to yourself with the same optimism and kindness.

Visit Neff's website for worksheets and other self-compassion resources ([Self-Compassion.org](https://www.self-compassion.org)).

Adam's Story: Remembering His Spark

I met Adam, a sixth grade special education teacher, when he came up to me after my presentation about the power of human connection, "Connection Cure: 5 Mind Shifts to Re-Humanize Education."

After thanking me, Adam explained that he loved his job, but he had been working later and later to meet all his students' needs. He felt the harder he worked, the more his students would learn, but his approach started to take a toll on his well-being and his relationships. He stopped going to the gym in the evenings and started ordering fast

food on the way home. His energy was depleted, and he would come home feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, leaving him unable to spend quality time with his wife. Every day, Adam felt frustrated, grumpy, and uninspired.

Adam told me that my energy and humor helped spark something inside of him that had been dormant for a long time. I had reminded him how much he had loved connecting and having fun with his students and had helped him feel hopeful for the first time in a long time. He vowed to change and thanked me for giving

him permission to believe that he mattered just as much as his students.

Two months later, Adam emailed me an update about his progress. He told me that he was going to the gym again and had started a gratitude practice with his students: At the end of each day, they had to write down three things they were grateful for. This activity helped Adam feel more in sync with his students and able to build better relationships with them. Adam also shared that by focusing on self-care and gratitude, he was able to better prioritize his relationship with his wife.

Taking Time

We all have the same 24 hours in the day, and if you do not make or take time for you, it will be taken by something or someone else. Even if you need to wake up an hour earlier than your family to exercise, journal, or just have some quiet time, it's worth it! You are the most important person in your life, and if you are not claiming time for you, then you won't have it. It is NOT selfish to "fill your own cup"—to take time for you.

Please don't confuse sitting on the couch watching the news while also scrolling through social media as self-care. It's not. Those are examples of checking out. There is a difference between focused, intentional time for yourself and checking out or numbing. Self-care is being intentional about what you might need and giving it to yourself—and about NOT JUDGING what you might need. For example, you love to exercise (see callout on page 12 for the benefit of exercise), but you haven't "found time" to fit it into your schedule. Change your routine. Start tomorrow by waking up 30 minutes early and going for a 30-minute walk. It does not have to be more complicated than that.



**"It is NOT selfish to
'fill your own cup'—
take time for you."**

Progress over Perfection

We've had a plague of perfectionism in education for a long time.

Dr. Brené Brown defines “perfectionism” as thinking that, “If I look perfect and do everything perfect, I'll avoid painful feelings of blame, judgement, and shame” (2012). Her point is that this kind of thinking is unhealthy and unrealistic. Educators who pursue perfection pursue a myth, and in doing so, they put unrealistic expectations on themselves and make self-esteem–damaging comparisons.

When you compare yourself to others you just feel terrible. Comparison can also send you down a scarcity spiral (e.g., “I'm not good enough, I am not that great of a teacher, why can't I just be like _____?”).



Education does not stop. You don't have the energy or time to waste worrying about perfection. Right now, moving forward is more important than getting everything perfect. Students and families need you to be there for them, not for you to spend all your time retooling your lesson plans or beating yourself up about a typo in the family email you sent late last night. Now is the time to just get it out there—whatever “it” may be.

The perfection paradox is why author Carol Dweck's work on mindset is so important. In her research, she's found that a growth mindset can be a powerful tool in helping individuals overcome the pain of perfectionism.

As part of her research, Dweck set out to see how children coped with challenge and difficulty. Dweck gave 10-year-olds problems that were slightly too hard for them to solve. Some children reacted in a super positive way by saying things like, “I love a challenge” and “I was hoping this would be informative!” These children knew their abilities could be developed, which Dweck called a “growth mindset,” while other children shut down and felt the problems were unfair. Dweck describes their reactions as tragic and catastrophic, because these children felt their intelligence was up for judgement and had more of a “fixed mindset.”

The best gift you can give yourself is to love challenges. When you enjoy effort and are intrigued by mistakes, you are practicing the growth mindset we want students to cultivate. If we model vulnerability, we also model strength, resilience, curiosity, and a whole host of other ideals. Your mistakes give students permission to make their own.

How do we build a growth mindset, especially under stressful conditions? First, go back and read the self-care section. Focus on making sure you are taking time for yourself! Next, decide you WANT to change your mindset because developing a growth mindset requires a mindset shift.

Fixed versus Growth Mindset

Fixed Mindsets	Growth Mindsets
Assume that character, intelligence, creativity, and other abilities are fixed	Believe that character, intelligence, creativity, and other abilities can be developed
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid challenges• Give up easily• See effort as futile• Refuse to accept useful feedback• Feel threatened by others' success	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embrace challenges as opportunities• Persist even if there are obstacles• Understand that effort leads to mastery• Learn from criticism• See others' success as inspiring



Here are a few ways you can start to build your own growth mindset.

“The power of yet.” Adding “yet” to the end of sentences, statements, and thoughts can really change your outlook. For example, you might say, “I can’t get all this work done.” But if you add “yet,” it allows you to see that you COULD complete your work if you reframed your situation. “I can’t get all this work done yet!”

A Florida teacher uses “the power of yet” to inspire her students to pass *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* lessons. “This is our *i-Ready* Wall of Champs! When a student passes a lesson, they put a sticky note on the wall.



Not pictured, the bottom half of the wall is our ‘YET’ area. If they do not pass a lesson, they put the sticky note in the ‘YET’ area below the other sticky notes because we aren’t there YET!”

Turn “I can’t” into “Yes, and . . .” When presented with something hard, a fixed mindset reaction is, “I can’t.” For example, you may be asked to teach a new grade level and want to say, “I can’t learn all of what I need to know by next year.” Instead of starting with “I can’t,” you could say, “Yes, and it might be a challenge for me to learn all the new content I’ll need. Could I get some extra planning time?” By switching “I can’t” to “yes, and . . .,” you are already shifting your mindset from fixed to growth.

“What could I do differently next time?” This is a power question. You will make mistakes; you are human and that is OK. If you do make a mistake or are struggling with a challenge, stop whatever you’re doing, breathe, and ask yourself, “What could I do differently next time?” Ask this question often, and give yourself time and space to really answer it!

“Your mistakes give students permission to make their own.”

In conclusion, I want you to know that you ARE doing an amazing job, even if you feel like you are not. If you reached out to families this week but you didn’t hear back from most of them, you’re still doing a great job. If only eight of your 35 students came to your virtual meeting, you’re still making progress. If you show up to work not knowing what you’re doing some days and are still willing to try, make a mistake, learn, and try again, you are doing an amazing job! You don’t have to be perfect; you just need to keep showing up for your students and their families. By continuing to show up, you are modeling a true growth mindset.

Megan’s Story: Let Go of Perfection

Megan is a middle school educator who never had a problem building relationships with her students. In fact, relationship-building is one of her strengths. However, when her school moved to remote learning in spring 2020, she struggled to connect with her students.

Fortunately, Megan attended one of my virtual professional development sessions, “How to Stay Connected,” and it helped her realize that she was doing everything she could to reach her students. It also helped her see that she didn’t have to be perfect, she just had to keep trying.

When I caught up with her, she told me that she started the 2020–2021 school year with a growth mindset, and she knows that things will not be perfect. She gives herself and her students permission to make mistakes, and she tells her students the same thing.

Megan knows she still has perfectionist tendencies to work through, but she is happy to be making progress.



Work-Life Balance

Now that you've dug in, taken some time for yourself, and gotten on board with progress over perfection, let's talk about getting more balance in your life.

Yes, things are crazy. Yes, you are working more than ever. Yes, you have so many more roles than ever before (i.e., teacher, home-school teacher, chef, recess aide, dishwasher, creative director of your family, etc.). However, there are still some things you can do to manage stress, uncertainty, and potential burnout to help you feel better in general.

Adjust Expectations

If 2020 has taught us anything, it is that change happens. It can happen fast or slow, and it can feel very overwhelming. However, change can also have silver linings. For example, the 2020–2021 school year has looked very different than past years, with students far apart and everyone wearing masks. Some educators started the new year teaching remotely, and that has looked very different for them, from tech setup to managing all the different elements of engaging students in virtual instruction. Either way, you may be experiencing a teaching environment very different from what you are used to, and that is OK.

If you expect to do/be/teach the same way you always have, it's going to put more stress on you and add to your anxiety and unhappiness. However, if you can surrender and accept that change is inevitable and different is OK, then you can begin to adjust to your current situation. Say you find yourself suddenly teaching remotely and that feels overwhelming. Can you shift your mindset to see the positives of your new situation? Maybe you can work faster now or teach the small groups you always wished you could, or maybe you can finally assign some creative projects that you were not able to before.



Set Boundaries with Email

Email does not need to control your life. Set times during the day when you check and respond to work emails. Sign out of your email program when you're not actively using it. That way you can work on projects without distraction.

Set Boundaries

Take a moment and think: What do you need right now? Whether you're in a classroom or teaching remotely, what would make your life easier? Really think about what you need to be successful. Maybe you need a clean workspace in a room with a door, or maybe you need to be clear with your principal on what would help you feel safe in your classroom. Once you have a clear idea of what you might need, the next step is to share your needs with others. If you need a clean workspace in a room with a door, can you work with your family to find that space? If you have ideas on how you can feel safer in your classroom, can you talk to your principal about what you need? The point of setting a boundary is not just knowing what you need—it's expressing that need to others, too.



*"Boundaries are simply,
what's OK and what's not OK."*

—Brené Brown

Establish a Positive Workspace

Sometimes it can be challenging to find your space, especially if you live in a smaller house or apartment or need to share workspaces with family members. If you are working from home, it's important that you have a space that is separate from your living space. If you are in a school building, having a clean, positive workspace where you can plan, grade, and feel safe and calm is very important to your mental well-being. You deserve a clean, positive workspace, wherever you are working. Even if it's a desk or a chair or a corner of your room, it's still important to have a space defined so you know that when you are there, you are working, and when you leave that space, you're leaving the work there, too. If you are at home, please do not make your daily workspace your bed or even your bedroom. If you do, there's no separation of work and rest.



Create Beginning and End-of-Day Routines

The COVID-19 pandemic threw all our routines out the window and made the 2020–2021 school year the year of uncertainty. Many educators now find themselves working from home—a situation that makes their home and work lives feel blended.

However, even educators whose school buildings are open have had to adjust to new rules and safety-related restrictions. If you used to meet colleagues in the staff room for coffee or socialize with coworkers before your first class, chances are those daily routines aren't possible right now.

Creating beginning and end-of-the-day routines can have a huge impact on your mindset. It's been a contributing factor to many famous people's success. For instance, Jane Austin would wake up, play the piano, eat breakfast with her family, and then start to write. Steve Jobs would start his morning asking, "If today were my last day on earth, what would I do?" (Van Edwards, 2018).

If you are working from home, consider starting each day with making your bed, getting a beverage (e.g., coffee, tea, water), turning on the light to your office space, taking a deep breath, and making a list of things you want to accomplish that day. If you are in a school building, when you walk into your classroom, get settled in and set a timer to take a mindful five minutes of breathing. When you're done, you, too, should make a list of things you want to accomplish.

That's it. The routines I'm proposing do not need to be huge changes. Very simple alterations can help you define your day. It's important to create new, empowering routines wherever you find yourself working.

Amy's Story: Make Time for Laughter

Amy is an elementary school principal, and 2020 has been the hardest year of her career. From focusing on safety protocols and training, to figuring out the logistics of how to safely open her school, to making sure that students who chose to learn remotely are still getting quality lessons, her work has become incredibly stressful.

Before Amy attended one of my sessions, "Improv(e) Connection in

Your Classroom and Beyond," she had been struggling to find ways to lift the morale of her staff.

After learning how improv comedy exercises could help her connect with her colleagues, Amy decided to try an activity at her next staff meeting.

She asked her educators to bring a joke to the meeting. Amy started the meeting by having a few educators

share their jokes. Everyone laughed at the jokes and at each other. It was the best staff meeting Amy had conducted in a long time. At the next staff meeting, she finished by asking everyone to dance the alphabet with their butts—another success!

Moral of the story: Even as a leader, it's never too late to laugh and dance with your staff!

Have More Fun!

As humans, and especially as educators, we tend to take ourselves very seriously. Educators have a lot to do and not a lot of time to accomplish it all. However, research in the fields of positive psychology and play have proven that there are techniques you can learn to reduce anxiety and stress and feel more connected to yourself and your students instantly. In this section, I'll dig right in to four ways for you to have more fun in your life, classroom, school, and relationships. All these activities can be adapted for in-person or virtual use and can even be done with your own family.

Positive Mindset

Researchers have found that positive classroom environments help foster stronger learning and student relationships. To create a positive environment, teachers must build a classroom culture in which students feel safe, supported, and are able to share their ideas—which is where one of my favorite improv comedy exercises comes in.

"Yes, and . . ." is considered to be the first rule of improv. It's called a rule because it's needed to make any improv scene or game work. The premise is that you accept whatever anyone says to be true and you add to it.

What I love about "Yes, and . . ." is that it can also be applied to your life, classroom, and school. When you focus on creating a learning environment based on "Yes, and . . .," you are inviting students to try new things, to accept what others are experiencing as their truths, and to practice empathy and active listening. Also, by saying, "Yes, and . . .," you open yourself up to positivity. With a "Yes, and . . ." mindset, you'll find you listen more, look for the positive in situations more, and feel more connected to those around you. When you express openness, you'll find it's easier to build trust in your classroom or learning space.

I've used this activity, philosophy, and rule countless times while working with educators.

My most powerful experience was when I was working with a group of assistant principals in a district, and I was supposed to coach them around their data. Right before my session, they had an active shooter training. As you know, those trainings can be very intense and even traumatic triggers for people. Because my time was short, I knew I needed to change the energy in the room, so before I began presenting, we played "Yes, and . . ." The exercise not only helped refocus our attention, but it also made people laugh, released some stress, and made the group more open to learning. "Yes, and . . ." really works!



Yes, and . . .

"Yes, and . . ." can be practiced with a group of people, one other person, virtually, or in real life. When you start using it with your students, you might find it's helpful to pick a conversation topic. The rules are simple: You just have to say, "Yes, and . . ."

Here's an example scenario:

You pick a topic, say, "school," and the first student to speak says,

"I'm worried about going back to school."

The second person must respond starting with, "Yes, and . . ."

"Yes, and . . . I'm worried about going back, too."

Then the first person has to say, "Yes, and . . ."

"Yes, and . . . maybe we could talk about it more together."

And then both students say,

"Yes!"

There are lots of versions of this, and the MAIN point is to say, "Yes," and then add something. Try it!

You will find that once you start using "Yes, and . . .," it affects all areas of your life. You'll notice that you're adding things instead of saying "but" and that your brain is primed for positivity.

Saying, "Yes" more opens us up to more positive experiences. Plus, it's fun!



Laughter

Picture someone laughing—seriously laughing at something. What does their body look like? What does their face look like? How are you feeling just picturing that person laughing? Yes, laughter is contagious!

The science of laughter is the subject of lots of contemporary research—though, there’s still plenty of research to do. Laughter has been proven to decrease stress and increase endorphins (i.e., feel-good hormones). Early research has also found that laughter increases social bonds among strangers. In their 2017 article “When Sharing a Laugh Means Sharing More: Testing the Role of Shared Laughter on Short-Term Interpersonal Consequences,” researchers Laura Kurtz and Sara Algoe found that when study participants reported more shared laughter (compared to unshared laughter), they experienced positive emotions toward each other and less negative emotions during shared interactions. Participants who shared laughter also stated that they saw their fellow participants as similar to themselves, which increased their connection with one another.

Laughter can also be a very powerful tool to break up learning and open our brains to want to learn more. I know from my own experience that this is true. When I was a senior in high school taking AP Calculus, the content was very rigorous and took a lot of focused brain power to understand. My teacher knew that, and she was a master at incorporating laughter and movement into her instruction. For one tricky concept, she had us stand up and act out “sine, cosine, tangent” with movement and sound. Not only did it break up the taxing work, but it also made lessons fun and memorable. I still remember what I learned that day.

Laughter can serve as classroom tool that you can use to help students (and you) feel safer, increase positive hormones that lead to a willingness to learn, and calm the overactive brains of students who’ve experienced trauma (Khajuria, 2018). Many educators, presenters, actors, and speakers have learned how to use humor to help people lean in, learn, and be more engaged.



Here are a few ways to include more laughter in your life and classroom:

- **Tell a Joke:** Ask your students and staff to send you their favorite jokes, then start each meeting or class with one of them!
- **Laughter Diaries:** Have students create “laughter diaries.” For one week, ask them to record things that made them laugh. Then you can have fun on a Friday sharing some funny experiences. You can also have “funny things that happened” sharing events throughout the year.
- **Silly Smile:** Have a smile contest (virtually or socially distanced). In this activity, students smile at one another and the first person to laugh wins . . . or is out and the remaining players must keep smiling without laughing. You get to choose the rules. Choose whatever helps to keep laughter alive!
- **Video Freeze:** This is a game you can play if you are teaching or working remotely. Everyone has seen someone’s camera “freeze” on video chat. (It’s never a pretty picture. Callers end up looking up the unfortunate person’s nose until their computer unfreezes.) The goal of this game is to have everyone make their best “freeze face” and hold it for five seconds. The last person to laugh, wins!

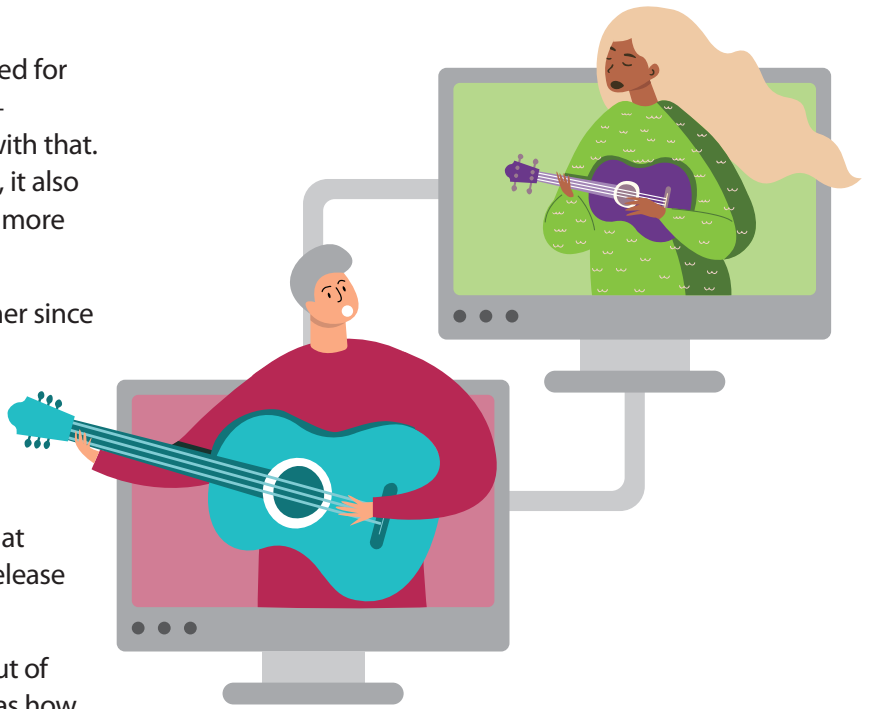


Singing

As we have discussed, we are neurobiologically wired for connection, and we need to feed our social brain—especially when we are isolated. Singing can help with that. Not only can singing produce feel-good hormones, it also can break up your day and help you laugh and feel more connected. (Seeing a theme?)

Singing has been connecting humans to one another since the beginning of time! One study published in the *Royal Society Scientific Journal* (Pearce, Launay, & Dunbar, 2015) found that when strangers sing together, it can quickly facilitate social cohesion. This is probably why we sing in church, school, and even at sporting events. Research has also found that singing can help us connect to our emotions and release pent-up feelings (Pearce et al., 2015).

One of the most interesting phenomena to come out of business and school shutdowns due to COVID-19 was how people started using music, especially song, to connect and bond with one another, even when they could not be together in person. Sing-along groups popped up on social media and it seemed like educators started to share more singing videos online. One educator made a fun video where she started to sing, but then screamed for a while. Educators continue to post creative videos making up their own words to songs, and even district leaders are doing this now, too!



Song Mix-Up Example

The link below will take you to my favorite example of Song Mix-Up.

The video linked below shows sixth grade students replacing the lyrics of a popular song performed by the singer Lizzo with ones about preparing for an *i-Ready Diagnostic*.

<https://youtu.be/pjTvOUSNSuU>

Here are some ways you can include singing into your daily routine (if you don't already):

- **Just Sing:** Pick your favorite song right now, and sing a few lines of it! How do you feel?
- **Staff Sing Along:** In the next staff meeting, even if it's virtual, start by asking everyone to sing a few lines of a popular song of your choice.
- **Word Song:** As an icebreaker for a group of students or staff, pick a word—"moon," for example. Then ask the group members to work together to come up with as many songs as they can with the word "moon" in it.
- **Song Mix-Up:** This is a game I play a lot! The premise? You ask students to rewrite words to popular songs based on a topic. For example: Give your students the tune of a popular song and have them replace the lyrics with ones about multiplication. Have students perform their new tune. Another option: Make a song up yourself, and share it with your students. I guarantee they will remember whatever you sing about!



Movement

Moving can help reduce stress and anxiety and make you laugh! Research has shown that if you are feeling negative emotions (e.g., stress, anxiety, worry, or sadness), moving can help you express and release them (Wilson & Conyers, 2014). And while you might be aware that movement is a powerful emotion regulator, you might not know that it's also a great learning tool. Scientists have found that you use the same part of the brain to learn as you do to move (Jensen, 2015). In fact, when we move our bodies, it enhances the neural connections in our brains, which help us learn.

It's still unclear to me why, with all the positive research on the correlation of movement and learning, "sitting and getting" is the dominant classroom modus operandum. What if we did

things a bit differently? What if we intentionally incorporated more movement into the day, and not just for physical education? Even now, as we are working in our homes more and are being asked to socially distance, and our other movement routines have been interrupted (e.g., going to the gym), it's critical to bring back movement into our lives!

Here are some ways to incorporate more movement into your classroom and life—even if it's at your desk at home or in your living room!

- **Get Moving:** Set an alarm or use an app that prompts you to move during your day. Stretch. Jump around. Get your blood flowing.
- **Minute Movement:** Every hour, stop whatever you're doing to do five jumping jacks or five squats.
- **Dance Break:** Build dance sessions into your day. If you are teaching in a physical classroom, dance after lunch or whenever you need to break the day up! If you are teaching virtually, end your lessons with a dance party.
- **Alphabet Dance:** This activity is my favorite! Simply put, all you do is put on a fun song that makes you want to move, and you spell out the alphabet with your butt. Yes, you read that correctly. I've done this activity with thousands of educators, and I use it on my own when I'm feeling down. Lower or uppercase letters? It doesn't matter. What does matter is that the Alphabet Dance boosts your mood, makes you laugh, and is a sure way to feel more connected to others and yourself. Try it!



The Benefits of Exercise

Exercise has been proven to improve your quality of life. Research has found that even 30 minutes of exercise a day can reduce stress and increase happiness. Other benefits can include better sleep, fewer feelings of depression and anxiety, and a greater sense of fulfillment. Exercise can also be a great way to connect with colleagues: Plan to take a walk after school or on your lunch break, or take a fitness class together (virtually or in person).

Conclusion

You made it! Let's check in one more time. How are you feeling? Hopefully this paper has given you permission to take care of yourself or to try some new ideas with your students, or maybe it's helped you feel lighter.

Even though being an educator can seem like the most stressful job in the world, it's also a job with an amazing community. The best way to get through difficulties is to get through them together. We have the power to combat stress, anxiety, and burnout and to take back our classrooms and lives. The choice is simple. The work might be hard at times, but remember that you are not alone.

What now? It's time to let go of old habits that didn't leave you enough time and space to take care of yourself. Adjust your mindset so you can believe that self-care is as necessary for educators as lesson planning. Act on one of these concepts you've just read about. Pick one and try it today—with your students, your staff, your family, and your friends! If you're still struggling to give yourself permission to take care of yourself, think of how much more effective you'll be at teaching when you're not stressed and therefore better able to focus on the present. By taking care of yourself, you'll also be modeling the kind of behavior you want your students to demonstrate.

The human experience involves feeling emotions, sharing emotions, and knowing you are not alone in your emotions. Please reach out and stay connected to yourself and one another. We can be the change we want to see in this world. Thank you for being in education and for being a champion for children. You are doing an amazing job.

Until we meet again, be you, be true, and be amazing!



References

- Association for Psychological Science. (2016, May 4). *Why “yes” is more powerful than “no.”* Association for psychological science. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/minds-business/why-yes-is-more-powerful-than-no.html>.
- Brain, M. (2020, April 1). *How laughter works*. How stuff works. <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/emotions/laughter.htm>.
- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection*. Random House.
- Brown, B. (2015). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Avery.
- Cipriano, C., & Brackett, M. (2020, April 7). *Teachers are anxious and overwhelmed. They need SEL now more than ever*. EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-07-teachers-are-anxious-and-overwhelmed-they-need-sel-now-more-than-ever>.
- DiSalvo, D. (2017, June 5). *Six science-based reasons why laughter is the best medicine*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/daviddisalvo/2017/06/05/six-science-based-reasons-why-laughter-is-the-best-medicine/?sh=4e9615ae7f04>.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Greenberg, D. M., & Gordon, I. (2020). *Lockdown singing: The science of why music helps us connect in isolation*. The conversation. <https://theconversation.com/lockdown-singing-the-science-of-why-music-helps-us-connect-in-isolation-137312>.
- Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the brain in mind* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Khajuria, K., MD. (2018). Laughter is the best medicine. *Psychiatric Times*, 35(8), 25.
- Kurtz, L. E., & Algoe, S. B. (2017). When sharing a laugh means sharing more: Testing the role of shared laughter on short-term interpersonal consequences. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 41(1), 45–65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-016-0245-9>.
- Madson, P. R. (2005). *Improv wisdom: Don't prepare, just show up*. Bell Tower.
- Moeller, J., Ivcevic, Z., White, A. E., Menges, J. I., & Brackett, M. A. (2018). Highly engaged but burned out: Intra-individual profiles in the US workforce. *The Career Development International*, 23(1), 86–105. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-12-2016-0215>.
- Neff, K. (2011). *Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. William Morrow.
- Pearce, E., Launay, J., & Dunbar, R. I. M. (2015). The ice-breaker effect: Singing mediates fast social bonding. *Royal Society*, 2(10). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150221>.
- Provine, R. (2016, June 6). *The science of laughter*. Psychology today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/200011/the-science-laughter>.
- Riley, C. (2018, April 24). *More than 9 in 10 elementary school teachers feel highly stressed, MU study finds*. MU news bureau. <https://munewsarchives.missouri.edu/news-releases/2018/0424-more-than-9-in-10-elementary-school-teachers-feel-highly-stressed-mu-study-finds/>.
- Sabato, G. (2019, June 26). *What's so funny?: The science of why we laugh*. Scientific american. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/whats-so-funny-the-science-of-why-we-laugh/>.

- Suttie, J. (2017, July 17). *How laughter brings us together*. Greater good magazine. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_laughter_brings_us_together.
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (2016, February 22). *The little things: Gratitude and shared laughter strengthen romantic partnerships*. Science daily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/02/160222144546.htm.
- Van Edwards, V. (2018). *Perfect your morning routine with 10 research-backed steps*. Science of people. <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/morning-routine>.
- Wilson, D., & Conyers, M. (2014, March 12). *Move your body, grow your brain*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/move-body-grow-brain-donna-wilson>.



Danielle Sullivan brings 10 years of teaching experience to her role as a National Director of Content and Implementation at Curriculum Associates. She specializes in establishing and strengthening middle school implementations with an emphasis on student engagement and motivation. Her popular webinars, presentations, and professional development training sessions have established her as a thought leader in educator well-being, personal development, self-care, and community building. Sullivan is the cohost of the Curriculum Associates' Extraordinary Educator podcast, a prolific writer, and a dedicated colleague to the schools and districts with which she partners.



Curriculum Associates

Curriculum Associates is a rapidly growing education company committed to making classrooms better places for teachers and students. We believe that all children have the chance to succeed, and our research-based, award-winning products, including *i-Ready*®, *Ready*®, BRIGANCE®, and other programs, provide teachers and administrators with flexible resources that deliver meaningful assessments and data-driven, differentiated instruction for children.

CurriculumAssociates.com

