

The Edutopia logo, featuring the word "edutopia" in a white serif font on a red rectangular background.

TEACHER WELLNESS

Use the Winter Break to Renew Your Spirits and Sense of Purpose

Tested techniques to help you ease stress and recharge your

batteries.

By

December 8, 2016

Teaching is stressful—**46 percent of our colleagues** (http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/issue_briefs/2016/rwjf430428) report high daily stress. “I work from 6 a.m. till 8 p.m. daily, and still cannot get it done,” writes a **fifth-grade teacher** (<https://thejournal.com/articles/2011/11/03/teacher-burnout.aspx>). “The union says don’t do it, but the teacher in me says I have to for the kids. I am now out on PTSD.”

Look in the mirror. How exhausted are you? Stress is not something to ignore. It makes bright days feel foggy and contributes to **negative health behaviors, obesity, and hypertension** (<http://tmhome.com/benefits/study-on-teacher-stress-and-teacher-burnout/>). So let’s do something about that over winter break.

Commit to Intensive Recharging

My first day of vacation has strict rules. After removing all electronic devices with screens, I lock myself in the guest bedroom. A sign taped to the door reads “Coma Day,” to signal that nobody should have expectations of me. Next to a bag of food, a sleep machine plays fish tank sounds. With all these elements in place, I stay in bed as long as I can stand it. One time I lasted until 5:45 p.m. Following these rules is the quickest strategy for recovering from exhaustion.

Try a Research-Supported Relaxation Technique

Relaxation works best if it occurs at a specific time and place and with a focus. A **2012 study** (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254734611_Relaxation_Intervention_for_Stress_Reduction_Among_Teachers_and_Staff) found that when a group of high school teachers practiced relaxation therapy for 30 to 45 minutes once a week for a month, they experienced reduced anxiety, stress, and burnout. If your school has a research database, you can view the transcript of the guided meditation at the link above. Or see Inner Health Studio’s **free relaxation scripts** (<http://www.innerhealthstudio.com/relaxation-scripts.html#section7>) .

Build Compassion Muscles

Don’t succumb to frustration over students or colleagues. The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for Healthy Minds has **scientifically validated** (<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/24/7/1171>) a technique to make you feel compassion for folks that stress you out. For two weeks, listen to this **32-minute guided meditation** (<http://centerhealthyminds.org/assets/files-resources/compassion.mp3>) . By the time you return to school, your heart will feel the difference.

Put Yourself Through a Superhero Workout

A couple of years ago, I invented my own “superhero workout” to make the transition from work to vacation smoother. It consists of early morning and evening visits to my gym. As a result of that double exertion, heroic levels of serotonin and dopamine blast through my brain all day. Bonus: I sleep like a polar bear.

Practice Mindfulness

"It's not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it," argued Hans Hubbard, a scientist who studied stress. One solution is mindfulness, a way to train your mind to create space between a cue and your response.

Set this online **mindfulness bell** (<http://fungie.info/bell/>) to gong every 15 minutes. That's your signal to take three deep breathes and focus on the present. For novelty, set the bell to ring at random times throughout the day.

Also, try surrounding yourself with visuals that remind you to relax.

Didde and Nikolaj Flor Rotne, the authors of *Everybody Present: Mindfulness in Education* (<http://www.parallax.org/product/everybody-present-mindfulness-in-education/>) , encourage teachers to hang a "mindfulness traffic light poster" in their classroom as a signal to do the following in order:

- **Stop** "and have the intention to create joy."
- **Accept** whatever "arises in your awareness" and smile.
- **Contribute** in the "best possible" way to whatever situation presents itself.

The same poster can go in your house to get you primed for next semester.

Perhaps your school faculty might start a mindfulness program designed for teachers like one of these:

- **PassageWorks Mindfulness** (<http://passageworks.org/programs/mindfulness/>)
- **Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education** (<https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/signature-programs/care-for-teachers/>)

- **Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques** (<http://www.smart-in-education.org/>)
- **Mindful Schools** (<http://www.mindfulschools.org/>)

Meditate

Scientifically verified **benefits of meditation for teachers include**

(<http://tmhome.com/benefits/study-on-teacher-stress-and-teacher-burnout/>)

“decreases in perceived stress, emotional exhaustion associated with teacher burnout, and depressive symptoms.” A **2008 experiment** (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pub-med/18954193>) found that people experienced a temporary dip in positive emotions at the beginning of their meditation journey (probably from frustration with learning a new skill). But after seven weeks of daily practice, participants felt a significant improvement in positive emotions. To get started, check out “**How to Meditate** (<http://www.ny-times.com/well/guides/how-to-meditate>) ,” which includes free guided meditation audio experiences.

Get Your Daily Dose of Hugs

Touching another human releases **oxytocin** (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/oxytocin>) in both parties (a similar effect can be obtained by **taking a hot bath or petting a dog** (<http://io9.gizmodo.com/5759511/10-ways-to-trick-your-brain-into-feeling-like-youre-in-love>)). One study reports that **five hugs a day** (<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2012/01/do-hugs-really-make-us-happier/>) will make you happier.

The Challenge Chart

This downloadable document (at right) summarizes six well-supported recuperation and resilience-building tools that can be printed out on a single page. Activate as many as you can during winter break. Use it to track your progress and challenge colleagues.

Work on Your Response to Stress

Here are three tools to help you improve your response to stress:

1. **Increase positive feelings.** Try **conversation tactics** (<http://theartofcharm.com/podcast-episodes/aoc-toolbox-how-to-keep-the-conversation-going-episode-562/>) from the podcast “The Art of Charm” to enhance meaningful connections.
2. **Increase confidence.** Twice a day, read a “**Ziglar Self-Talk Card** (<https://oy275.infusionsoft.com/app/form/2fd5df200d81f517578a3a566cde4a0c>) ” (requires email signup).
3. **Increase focus.** If you have to work over the holidays, apply Cal Newport’s **Deep Work** (<http://calnewport.com/books/deep-work/>) principles. **Here’s a summary** (<https://paul-minors.com/deep-work-cal-newport-book-summary-pdf/>) .

By strategically defending against stress, you can model for students what it means to be engaged and joyful. Such a life is possible if taking care of yourself every day becomes a priority.

Got any plans for relaxation during this break? We’d love to hear about them.

FILED UNDER

Teacher Wellness (<http://www.edutopia.org/blogs/tag/teacher-wellness>)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Finley (<http://www.edutopia.org/users/todd-finley>)

Blogger and Assistant Editor (Contractor)

@finleyt (<http://www.twitter.com/finleyt>)

SHARE THIS STORY

Source: www.edutopia.org/article/use-winter-break-to-renew-spirits-sense-of-purpose-todd-finley

Reprint Policy: www.edutopia.org/terms-of-use

Privacy Policy: www.edutopia.org/privacy-policy