

# HEALTH & HEALING in the SCHOOL LIBRARY A Return to Better?

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The 2020–2021 school year was plagued by the triple trauma of COVID-19, racial strife, and economic crisis. As we have attempted to return to “normal” in 2021, we’ve heard over and over again—on social media, from administration, in the news—that we should be “taking time for ourselves” and finding ways to implement self-care. On Michelle Obama’s podcast, Michelle Norris stated, “don’t reach for normal, reach for better” (Obama 2020). We couldn’t agree more, but what does that look like and where do we start? How do we find the time, and how can we possibly put ourselves first when our students are struggling and we feel that we need to offer them a sense of normalcy?

We don’t have all the answers, but we’d like to propose a new kind of normal—a better normal in which we value our own mental and emotional well-being as much as our students’. We boldly propose, in fact, that it doesn’t have to be one or the other. We can care for ourselves while also caring for others. In fact, we’d like to stress how important it is that we do so, not only for our own sanity, but also as an example to the future generations in our care. While the rest of this issue will focus on what we can do to care for others, this feature

is focused solely on how to care for yourself!

### Compassion Fatigue

“I’m too tired to [exercise, cook, meditate, etc.]” “I don’t have the mental or emotional energy to do anything beyond what’s required.” You may recognize yourself in one of these statements. We’ve all been there at one time or another, but it’s exceedingly unhealthy to live in a constant state of fatigue. Unfortunately, the very nature of the teaching profession, like that of the caregiver field, lends itself to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress or secondary stress disorder, occurs when “professionals who do not actually experience a client’s trauma firsthand may manifest symptoms of it via the client’s endurance of it” (Hoffman, Palladino, and Barnett 2007, 17). Our “clients” are, of course, our students.

While compassion fatigue has long been an issue for the teaching profession with students bringing a range of traumas with them to the classroom (abusive homes, food insecurity, etc.), the effects of that trauma have likely worsened in the year and a half they have been at home and away from the structure and stability of the school day.

This means a greater likelihood of compassion fatigue for educators. The danger is that prolonged secondary exposure to trauma and the untreated mental and emotional effects of compassion fatigue can ultimately lead to burnout and abandonment of the teaching profession (Hoffman, Palladino, and Barnett 2007).

### Overworked and Underpaid

Another issue that leads to educator burnout is being overworked and underpaid. Research shows that teachers are fairly unique in their reasons for overwork. The phenomenon of overwork has been widely studied, and the two prevailing theories for why overwork occurs are related to money and a preference for work life over home life. However, for teachers the motivation is very different and has to do with “1) teachers’ equation of the expanded role with good teaching practice; 2) the moral imperative of teaching; and 3) the desire to live up to the expectations held by themselves and their colleagues” (Barlett 2002, 16). Educators routinely arrive early, stay late, and take work home with them, despite the lack of any extra financial

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incentives. This is the culture of education, and it's another reason that self-care is an absolute necessity.

"Well, great," you may find yourself saying, "But what do I do about it?" We're glad you asked! We have suggestions for two simple ways you can begin to incorporate the often-difficult practice of self-care into your lives: mindfulness and visual journaling. Our recommendation is that you try both to see whether one appeals to you more, or if you actually prefer to integrate both into your personal self-care practice.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness often evokes visions of a sage or guru, yogi, or very disciplined individual sitting cross-legged, hands resting on knees as if in meditation, tuning in to their own self. But mindfulness is so much more. Mindfulness is the "ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us" (Bayes-Fleming et al. 2018).

Mindfulness is attention to how you're feeling at any given moment. Are you stressed? Is your breathing normal, labored, faster than usual? Is your heart racing? How are your shoulders? Relaxed? Pulled up tight toward your ears? Have you taken a deep breath today?

Mindfulness is attention to detail. How does your food taste? What does it smell like outside? How does the sun feel? How is the lighting in your space right now? Too bright? Not bright enough? What is the feel of your clothing? Are you comfortable as you are right now?

Mindfulness can create a deeper awareness of others. How does the room feel? Can you sense tension? Is this person happy? Is this person supportive? Sad? Showing signs of a

need? Can you fill their needs? When you are more in tune with your own feelings and composition, you're more aware of others.

Once you begin to draw attention to the space within and around yourself, mindfulness in your daily routine becomes second nature. Mindfulness has many health benefits such as boosting immune systems, improving sleep, decreasing anxiety and depression, fostering altruism, combating bias, and improving self-image ("Mindfulness Definition" n.d.). How can you begin to cultivate mindfulness to enhance your self-care routine and create a new normal for yourself?

## Mindful Breathing

Breathing techniques vary based on your desired outcome. Mindful breathing involves simply paying attention to your breath at any given moment. By using small pauses throughout your day, you can improve your mood and create a mindful moment to pause.

Many smartwatches and phones have a built-in health app that allows you to set timers and reminders throughout the day to cultivate these mindful breaks to stop and breathe. If not, set timers every few hours during the day. "But what if I don't have time to stop and breathe?" That's understandable. In general, educators are busy people throughout the day. Another suggestion is to use an already established routine. For example, before getting out of bed in the morning, add in a few mindful



Figure 1. Tibetan singing bowl played by Ashley Cooksey. Photo credit Arshia Khan, Arshia Khan Photography.

breath cycles, as described below, and then repeat at bedtime. Using already established routines means that you're more likely to stick with new habits.

## Breathing Technique

Take your time here. Don't simply inhale and exhale once. Find a comfortable place to sit or stand, close your eyes. Before you begin, allow yourself to relax the muscles in your face, jaw, neck, and shoulders. Then, draw attention to your breath. Focus on the nuances of how it feels without judging or giving the sensations names. Just breathe. Inhale through your nose and exhale slowly the same way. Allow your lungs to completely fill and relax throughout several breath cycles. Finally, return your attention to your surroundings before opening your eyes and carrying on with your day.



Figure 2. Ashley Cooksey demonstrates seated meditation. Photo credit Arshia Khan, Arshia Khan Photography.



Figure 3. Finger painting example.

## Meditation

Meditation is another method to bring mindfulness to your routine. While the terms meditation and mindfulness are often interchanged, they are not quite the same. Mindfulness is a form of meditation. I (Ashley) often hear friends say, “I need to meditate on that before making a decision.” That is the exact opposite of what meditation should be. Meditation allows you to slow down, clear your mind, and check in with how you feel without judgment. You may have thoughts or ideas during meditation, but you shouldn’t dwell on them. Just like Elsa from Disney’s *Frozen*, let it go. There are a few meditation techniques in which you focus on or repeat a sound (see figure 1), word, phrase, or mantra; however, meditation does not require you to think. Our brain’s only job is to think, to process. Meditation allows us to relax our mind, our thinking muscle, and be mindful of how we are feeling.

## Meditation Techniques

While there are many meditation techniques, I (Ashley) suggest three that are described on the Mayo Clinic’s website (2020). My personal favorite is sitting meditation because it can be done wherever you happen to be at the moment. I’ve even done this in my car while stuck in traffic (completely stopped and at a standstill; not suggested while actively driving or at a stoplight).

- Body scan meditation. Lie on your back with your legs extended and arms at your sides, palms facing up. Focus your attention slowly and deliberately on each part of your body from toe to head or head to toe. Be aware of any sensations, emotions, or thoughts associated with each part of your body.

- Sitting meditation (see figure 2). Sit comfortably with your back straight, feet flat on the floor and hands in your lap. Breathing through your nose, focus on your breath moving in and out of your body. If physical sensations or thoughts interrupt your meditation, note the experience and then return your focus to your breath.
- Walking meditation. Find a quiet place ten to twenty feet in length, and begin to walk slowly. Focus on the experience of walking, being aware of the sensations of standing and the subtle movements that keep your balance. When you reach the end of your path, turn and continue walking, maintaining awareness of your sensations.

The challenge here is to bring awareness to yourself, emotions, and sensations but not dwell on any of them. It can be difficult at first but becomes easier the more you practice. To begin, try for a goal of five minutes three times a week. If you need support or help getting started, check out the Headspace App (<[headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)>), which is free for educators in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia. The app offers guided meditation sessions to help you incorporate this self-care technique as you create space in your schedule.

## Visual Journaling

John Dewey said “We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience” (“John Dewey Quotes” n.d.). Visual journaling, or art journaling, involves reflecting on experience through the use or creation of visual imagery. Rather than keeping a written journal to reflect on your

experiences, a visual journal allows you to be creative in your interpretation of thoughts and feelings. Artistic ability is not required for visual journaling, just the willingness to think and to experiment.

I (Jennifer) use visual journaling both personally and professionally. I came to it by way of a research group that I got involved with, and I was admittedly very intimidated at first by the artistic abilities of two of our research group members. But they were very kind and welcoming and helped talk me through the importance of visual journaling as a process rather than an art project. I soon discovered a love of collage and finger painting—yes, finger painting! There are, in fact, more finger-painted pages in my personal journal than anything else (see figure 3). The simple joy of getting my hands dirty and touching paint to page to create an image that captures how I'm feeling allows for a kind of release that I would not get through the written word—I know because I've kept written journals in the past.



Figure 4. Dictionary collage example.

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Table 1. Visual journaling supply options and resource list.

Supplies	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mixed-media art journal</li> <li>Watercolor pallet (the cheap Crayola ones are great for beginners)</li> <li>Paint brushes (I buy the inexpensive bulk packages with multiple shapes/sizes)</li> <li>Acrylic paints (the \$.50 bottles from Walmart or Michael's work great)</li> <li>Markers</li> <li>Colored pencils</li> <li>Crayons</li> <li>Glue/Tape</li> <li>Old magazines and/or books for collaging</li> <li>An old hairdryer (to dry paint backgrounds so you can work on the page quicker)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alisa Burke's blog: &lt;<a href="https://alisaburke.blogspot.com">https://alisaburke.blogspot.com</a>&gt;</li> <li>Ganim, B., and S. Fox. 1999. <i>Visual Journaling: Going Deeper than Words</i>. Quest Books.</li> <li>Pinterest collection of 236 visual journaling images: &lt;<a href="http://www.pinterest.com/d2hall/visual-journaling">www.pinterest.com/d2hall/visual-journaling</a>&gt;</li> <li><i>Psychology Today</i> post "Visual Journaling as a Reflective Practice": &lt;<a href="http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/arts-and-health/201604/visual-journaling-reflective-practice">www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/arts-and-health/201604/visual-journaling-reflective-practice</a>&gt;</li> <li>The Art of Education's "The 10 Best Supplies for Visual Journaling": &lt;<a href="https://theartofeducation.edu/2018/07/09/the-10-best-supplies-for-visual-journaling/">https://theartofeducation.edu/2018/07/09/the-10-best-supplies-for-visual-journaling/</a>&gt;</li> </ul>

You can begin a visual journaling practice with a plain piece of paper and a box of crayons or markers, things you probably already have available to you at work or home. You can create based on a prompt or a picture or a feeling, whatever inspires you. If you conduct a web search for "visual journaling" or "art journaling" you can view all kinds of examples and you will find a number of prompts to help you begin. However, I've also compiled a list of possible inspiration:

- Save and print memes, quotes, or poems related to a particular topic; create a collage or focus a page on just one of them.
- Focus on a word or feeling; create a visual representation of that word/feeling, or write the word over and over, filling an entire page.

- Cut a definition from a dictionary and create a page around that definition (see figure 4).
- Use two or three paint colors that represent how you're feeling, and engage in some joyful finger painting.
- Choose an image or object; put your writing utensil on the page and draw the image/object without looking at the page or lifting your hand. Use that drawing as a starting point to create. This is called blinded contour drawing.

If you find that you enjoy visual journaling and would like to expand your arsenal of supplies and your list of resources, I've included a short list of each in the table above. Again, if you search online, you will find a plethora of recommendations for both supplies and resources.

I hope that you will find visual journaling both fun and beneficial to your mental and emotional health. Happy creating!

## Conclusion

After a year of turmoil and unsteadiness in our lives, our country, and our world, taking steps to improve and increase your self-care is one thing you can do to reach for better. Compassion fatigue, being overworked and underpaid, and the emotional stress that is added simply because we care about each and every one of our students can take a toll on our capacity to care for ourselves both physically and mentally. Creating space for yourself to breathe and process emotions can improve your interactions with co-workers and students. While we have provided you with a handful of methods to process and begin self-care there are many more available.



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