



Summer: It's YOUR Time!

by SOPHIA SLANEY

Summer is just around the corner and teachers will be looking forward to a well-earned rest. The last weeks of school are a frenzy of activity with report cards, assemblies and classroom clean-out. It can be challenging for some teachers to switch off from work and avoid planning ahead to next year's lesson plans. Teaching is a calling, not just a profession, which makes it difficult sometimes to step away. Transitioning into "summer mode" may not be easy to do. There is empirical evidence indicating that it is in teachers' best interests to do so. Research out of the UK supports the idea that planning for a summer break that is restful and restorative is a good idea. A study of 90 teachers from across the UK by a research team, led by Dr. Paul Flaxman and Sonja Carmichael at City University, London, found that it is important for teachers to stop working and even thinking about work during school breaks and holidays. The report states that the time off allows teachers to "restore their emotional energy". Furthermore, Dr. Flaxman, a senior lecturer in organizational psychology at City University, stated that "Making sure that teachers have regular opportunities to recover from the considerable demands of the job will help to prevent burnout". Summertime, then, is the perfect time to unwind and recharge – the perfect time to look after "you".

Relax

As teachers, we are commonly looked to be the "go-to" person at school, or with your family and friends when they have a problem or something important needs to get done. Summer is the time to dial it back and slow down. Take some time for yourself to do things that are just for you. This isn't selfish. It is vital to look after yourself so that you can continue to look after others. You've heard Eleanor Brown's saying, "You can't serve from an empty vessel". It's easy for teachers to become an empty vessel because, by nature, they are compassionate and giving individuals. Therefore, try to devote a few hours each day

to being GOOD to YOU! Get together with friends, enjoy a rousing game of golf or a hike in nature, start a new hobby or revisit an old one, read a non-professional book, listen to audiobooks and so on. Choose activities that bring YOU joy and – do them!

When you finally "arrive" in summer mode, to get the full benefit of your relaxation time, be mentally present. Gail Kinman, a professor of occupational psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, says that if you're not working, you may be thinking and worrying about work which "defeats the object of relaxation." She suggests that teachers practice some mindfulness techniques where you anchor yourself in the present moment. Mindfulness is the act of being present without judgement of what is happening; it is being aware and observing our thoughts.

Additional research on mindfulness point to benefits for both teachers and students. Patricia A. Jennings, a professor at the University of Virginia, led a team of researchers who collected data on educators' well-being, observations of classrooms and student behavioural reports over the course of a year. She found that teachers who received emotional regulation training (including mindfulness) were more emotionally supportive, demonstrated greater sensitivity to student needs, and provided more positive and productive classroom environments. The report concluded that when educators have opportunities across the school year to practice the arts of mindfulness, listening and emotional management, they can better navigate any number of stressors they face in a given day. Furthermore, when assessing teachers' stress levels, teachers noted considerably less distress and an improved ability to manage their emotions.

Reflect

Another way to restore your energy over the summer is to spend some time thinking about the successes of the past year. Reflecting on the year's accomplishments can lead to a feeling of effectiveness. Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology (the

science of well-being), has identified five areas that, when cultivated, lead to people feeling good and functioning well. The five areas are often described as pillars of well-being known as PERMA (P-positive emotions, E-engagement, R-positive relationships, M-meaning, A-accomplishments). One of these five pillars is accomplishment – knowing and celebrating our achievements and goals. Celebrating your accomplishments can renew your sense of purpose and affirm your strengths. It can remind you why you love teaching and mentally ignite you for a fresh start to the new school year.

Reenergize

Self-care shouldn't only be a priority in the summertime. It is easy to forget about your own needs when you have so many responsibilities during the school year. Use the summer to create a helpful self-care routine. The self-care habits we have finetuned during the summer can be carried into the new school year. The fun activities we enjoyed all summer season could be reframed and viewed as self-care. We don't need to wait until summer to get the same sense of fulfillment and vitality they provide. We could frame these activities as contributing to meaningful self-care all year long. Authors Jonathan Weinstein and Lauren Porosoff assert that by focusing on the *function* of our favourite summer activities rather than the *form*, we might be more open to what self-care can mean for us year-round. For example, in the summer, we may connect with loved ones on the beach or around a campfire. In the fall and winter, connecting with loved ones may consist of lunches on weekends with friends or having Sunday dinner at a family member's house.

There are many warm-weather practices we could continue beyond the summer season to restore the body, mind and spirit. Some of us recharge by enjoying alone time while others of us are energized by spending time with others. Recharge the body with a healthier diet by taking advantage of the fresh fruit and vegetables that are more readily available during the summertime and learn to cook some new healthy meals that are easy to make. Take advantage of any good weather we might have to enjoy the outdoors. Find something fun that gets you moving. Create an effective sleep routine. While you have the time, create or strengthen good habits and you will reap the benefits from them all year long.

Whatever recharges you and makes you feel good – do more of it this summer. If work recharges you, remember to balance it with plenty of time off. Look for professional development that is worthwhile or on a topic that you are eager to learn more about.

At the end of the summer, when you are engaged in preparatory activities for the new school year, set boundaries and limits around your time. Go to your classroom during the last part of the summer and only on rainy days. Strengthening these self-care skills in the summer will make it easier to apply them during the school year when it becomes very busy. According to registered dietitian Nancy Clark, “you will choose to carry your good habits with you into the school year when you stay mindful of the benefits of healthful fueling and enjoyable activities.”

It IS all about YOU!

Taking a break from developing lesson plans and curriculum materials and, instead, investing in some much deserved “you” time will help you to strengthen your emotional resilience and it could be the way to prepare for your best year yet. Dr. Sue Roffey, a psychologist and academic who has published widely on the subject of well-being, says that teachers themselves recognise that focussing on their own well-being is crucial in supporting student well-being. The growing evidence coming from the field of Positive Psychology is showing how we can not only support student well-being, but also that of teacher well-being. If teachers have strategies to support their well-being, they will be better placed to manage every day stressors of the job to not only survive, but flourish. In doing so, they become better role models and educators for their students.

Treating yourself with care can help you achieve a positive work-life balance and approach stress management in a way that balances your needs and the needs of your students. Summer is a great time to take a step back, evaluate your self-care needs, and start practicing beneficial behaviors so they become habits before school starts. Practicing these approaches over the summer can help you prepare for the challenges of back-to-school, so you'll start the school year more energized, more rested, and ready to give your students your best all year long. This summer, take the opportunity to invest in yourself and maybe even establish a few more healthy habits to carry through to the rest of the year. You will return to school in the fall feeling more balanced and revitalized and ready to inspire a new group of students.

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