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Prioritizing Your Well-being: The Heart of a Successful School Year

by Leslie Brown

You pour your heart and soul into helping students learn, grow, and succeed. But in the chaos of lesson planning, grading, and attending meetings, it's easy to forget about yourself.

The fresh start of a new school year is an ideal time to reflect on the balance between your passion for teaching and your own well-being. Think of it like putting your own mask on before helping others. It's not just practical; it is essential for long-term success and happiness.

Self-care: Small steps, big impact

Self-care isn't the same for everyone, and that's ok. It might mean taking a walk at lunchtime, reading a book, or playing board games with friends. It's important to remember that it doesn't need to be large or time-consuming. Self-care has been shown to improve mental health, enhance self-esteem, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- **Mindful breathing:** Deep breathing can calm your nervous system. There are apps or online tools that offer free guided breathing exercises to make it easy.
- **Stretching or movement:** A stretch between classes or a 10-minute walk during lunch, when possible. Small things can have big impacts on your energy and mood.
- **Make time for yourself:** Even if it's just five minutes, take that time for yourself. Whether you read, journal, or just sit quietly, a small act can make a big difference.

Reflection:

1. What self-care practices can you integrate into your daily routine, even if only for five minutes?
2. How often do you take a break? When you do, how does it impact your mood and productivity?

Build a support system: You don't have to do it alone

Research consistently shows that strong social connections are as vital to our health as proper nutrition and regular exercise. Having a strong network

can often make you feel less stressed and more content at work.

- **Buddy-up:** Find colleagues you connect with and share resources, lesson plans, or even a self-care activity.
- **Mentorship:** Mentorship (as a mentee or mentor) can bring many formal and informal benefits for those involved.
- **Find your tribe:** A lunch group, a weekly Zoom chat, or an online space to share advice. Find your people and stay connected.

Reflection:

1. Who can you reach out to for support with your professional journey?
2. How can you nurture meaningful connections with colleagues this year?

Setting realistic expectations:

Perfection isn't the goal

There will always be something on your plate. We often feel the pressure to be "perfect," but in truth, no one is. Striving for perfection can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout. What really matters is progress, not perfection.

- **Celebrate the wins:** even the small ones. It could be a successful lesson or a breakthrough moment with a student; take time to celebrate the little victories. These moments matter.
- **Break it down:** When tasks seem overwhelming, break them into smaller, manageable steps. Prioritize based on urgency and importance.

Reflection:

1. In what areas are you striving for perfection? Does this impact your well-being?
2. How can you celebrate small successes that contribute to your growth and the success of your students?

Finding Work-Life Integration: Work, life, and everything in between

Balance can be tricky. Finding it is vital to burnout prevention. Achieving work-life integration

between your professional and personal life is key to your well-being and can help with long-term job satisfaction.

- **Set Boundaries:** It's okay to say "no." Read that last sentence again. Protecting your time and space is crucial for your mental health.
- **Unplug:** It's easy to forget (or maybe ignore?) how technology impacts you. Find a relationship with technology that adds value to your life, and if it's necessary, create habits to disconnect and recharge.
- **Hobbies and socializing:** Some of us hate to miss out. Others live life with JOMO (joy of missing out). Find what works for you. Perhaps it's playing an instrument, hiking, or enjoying dinner with friends. Make time for activities that bring joy and fill up your cup.

Reflection:

1. Where are you currently feeling off-balance?
2. What is one boundary you could establish right now to protect your time and energy?
3. What activities outside of work fill your cup? How can you incorporate them more into your life?

Nourishing your body: You can't teach on empty

The food you eat directly impacts you, and more and more we are realizing not only a psychological connection but a biochemical and physical connection between what we eat, the way it makes us feel, and our mental health.

- **Hydrate:** Drink water throughout the day. Dehydration can cause fatigue, headaches, and mood swings.
- **Healthy snacks:** Keep healthy snacks nearby to boost energy when you need it. Avoid sugary snacks or excessive caffeine (sorry) that lead to crashes later.
- **Balanced meals:** Look for meals that combine protein, healthy fats, and complex carbs to keep your energy levels steady.

Reflection:

1. How does your diet affect your energy levels and ability to focus?
2. What small changes can you make to nourish your body for better performance at work and home?

Need nutrition advice? **Dial-a-Dietitian** is a free service that connects you with local dietitians who can help answer questions and provide practical guidance. You can access this service by calling 811.

Mindfulness: A few minutes can make a big difference

Mindfulness techniques can help you stay calm, focused, and present—both for your students and yourself.

- **Start your day with intention:** Begin your morning reflecting on what you're grateful for and set a positive intention for the day.
- **Mindful pauses:** When you're feeling overwhelmed, take 30 seconds to close your eyes and breathe deeply. This simple act can help you reset and regain your focus.

- **Guided meditations:** Apps like Headspace, Calm, or YouTube offer short, guided meditation sessions that can fit easily into your busy day.

Reflection:

1. How can you realistically incorporate mindfulness into your daily routine?
2. What is one mindful practice you can begin now to set a positive tone for the day?

Reach out for help: You are never alone

Life can come with many challenges. It's important to acknowledge when you need support and know that seeking support is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it's a sign of strength and self-awareness. Just as you support your students, it's crucial to support yourself by reaching out for help when needed.

- **Crisis support:** If you're in immediate need of support or feel you are in crisis, contact 811. This service is available anywhere in the province 24/7 for urgent needs, including mental health or emotional crises.
- **Local Doorways walk-in counselling:** Doorways is a provincial network of same-day/same-week, no-cost mental health counselling for individuals experiencing mental health issues. To find a Doorways near you, visit www.bridgethegapp.ca or call 811, and a Healthline nurse will provide you with information for your area.
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** EAP for Teachers is here for you. We help connect you with confidential counselling and support services for personal or professional challenges. You can learn more about EAP by visiting www.nlta.nl.ca.

Reflection:

1. How comfortable are you with asking for help? What steps can you take to make it easier when you need support?

As we head into this school year, remember that your well-being is crucial to your students' success. Prioritizing self-care, building a strong support system, setting realistic expectations, and finding balance will not only help you thrive as a teacher but also set a powerful example for your students about the importance of mental and physical health.

Here's to a healthy, happy, and successful school year!

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References:

Food, Health & Consumer Products of Canada (www.fhpc.ca/en/)
 Health & Wellness Canada (www.healthcouncilcanada.ca)
 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (www.camh.ca)