

# Building Student Resilience Through Mindfulness and Social and Emotional Learning

*The recent and ongoing pandemic has caused disruptions to schools, homes, and communities. These disruptions have caused concerns in mental health and trauma, which educators can help alleviate through resiliency training in social and emotional learning. However, educators must also focus on self-care and their own wellness, which can be done through assessing wellness and developing a wellness plan. Having the support of leaders with an emotional intelligence framework ties all of the pieces together to provide a school environment in which everyone involved will develop tools they can utilize well into the future.*

**Keywords:** *trauma, mindfulness, resilience, wellness, emotional intelligence*

**The past year brought** a tremendous amount of change to students' lives through disruptions to their home and school lives. Many insecurities in general were generated by the pandemic. Educators can assist students in building coping skills and navigating changes by teaching them resilience through social and emotional learning (SEL). This paper will discuss how educators develop an awareness of the signs of trauma, design lessons centered around mindfulness and resiliency, integrate a personal wellness plan to maintain life balance, and how leaders can utilize emotional intelligence.

The COVID-19 pandemic, classified by many as a crisis, has caused disruptions and loss to students, educators, and administrators. Our students and those around them experienced loss on a daily basis: loss of stability, loss of routine, and possibly actual loss of loved ones from the disease. A recent study in *JAMA Network Open* (Ettman et al., 2020) showed depression symptoms were three-fold higher during the pandemic. Those with lower incomes, with less in savings (less than \$5,000), and those exposed to greater stressors, showed the most signs of depression symptoms during COVID-19. A separate study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* determined that individuals with higher education experienced a greater increase in depressive symptoms and a greater decrease in life satisfaction during COVID-19 in comparison to those with lower education (Wanberg et al., 2020). In addition, a recent global survey showed that anxiety symptoms during the pandemic doubled (Pennington Biomedical Research Center, 2020).

Adolescents are also feeling stress. A report published by America's Promise (2020) showed 52% of 13–19-year-olds in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic are very concerned about their and their family's health, 30% are concerned about having their basic needs met, and 29% reported not feeling connected at all to school adults, to their classmates (23%), or to their school community (22%). While the pandemic is ongoing and the effects will last for some time, it is important for educators to prioritize mental health and ensure students feel safe and connected. Trauma, and the impacts of trauma, can last a lifetime. Helping students learn resilience in the face of trauma can teach them strategies that will change their mindsets throughout their lives.

## **Grief, Loss, and Trauma**

Grief is defined as the “emotion, generated by an experience of loss and characterized by sorrow and/or distress and the personal and interpersonal experience of loss” (Humphrey, 2009, p. 5). Grief is a reaction to the loss of anyone or anything an individual is attached to deeply. People can mourn events such as the passing of a pet, divorce, or the loss of a job (Meyers, 2016). It is probably safe to say that not all cases of grief or loss are traumatic, but trauma nearly always involves loss.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition*, or *DSM-5*, (American Psychological Association, 2013) defines trauma- and stressor-related disorders as those “disorders in which exposure to a traumatic or stressful event is listed explicitly as a diagnostic criterion” (p. 265). Included in this chapter of the *DSM-5* are reactive attachment disorder, disinhibited social engagement disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder, and adjustment disorder. Trauma can also be more simply defined as an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced (either real or perceived) as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, with lasting adverse effects.

Domestic abuse is on the rise as a result of COVID-19. Amid the growing worldwide health pandemic, many health workers are turning to a deep breathing technique that was used in the past by elite fighters as a wartime stress-fighting tactic. Box breathing describes the pattern of inhaling slowly and deeply through your nose to the count of four. You inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds and then repeat in four seconds -- making a square pattern. Navy SEAL teams use box breathing to develop emotional discipline by clearing the mind, a critical decision-making technique during pressure (Lambert, 2020).

## **Personal Wellness Plan**

“You cannot pour from an empty cup” and “You must put your own oxygen mask on before helping others” are old adages most everyone knows. Educators may know they must attend to their personal needs before they are able to attend to the needs of others, but that does not mean it is an easy thing to do. Wellness and resiliency for educators must remain at the forefront and be worked into daily schedules. This is possible through the promotion of formal and informal supports for self-care. By looking at the numbers, educators can see how critical it is for them to take care of themselves. In August 2020, the World Health Organization reported:

Mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health. Close to 1 billion people are living with a mental disorder, 3 million people die every year from the harmful use of alcohol, and one person dies every 40 seconds by suicide. And now, billions of people around the world have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is having a further impact on people's mental health (para. 1).

Statistics for teachers do not look much better. In 2015, the American Federation of Teachers reported nearly 73% of teachers stated feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, and that 34% cited a decline in their mental health including increased stress, depression, and emotional changes. In a follow-up survey in 2017, the number climbed to a 58% decline in mental health.

Educator working conditions have a direct effect on the learning environment of our students...We can ensure safe, welcoming, supportive learning environments for kids when communities, parents, educators, and administrators work together to build supportive working environments for teachers and school staff (American Federation of Teachers, 2017, p. i).

The Global Wellness Institute defines wellness as “the active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” (n. d., para. 2). Most models of wellness include at least six dimensions: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental. Additionally, wellness exists on a continuum from a state of illness and reactivity to a state of optimal well-being, proactivity, and prevention (Global Wellness Institute, n. d.).

To meet as many of the dimensions of wellness as possible, educators should cultivate habits to promote health. The first priority in this routine should be basic physical needs, such as time for sleep, exercise, nutrition, and basic self-care. Next, schedule time each day for taking care of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs. These may include short periods of time for breaks, social connection, meditation, or prayer. Finally, educators can make time for activities that bring joy and comfort. During this activity, using mindfulness to stay present and focused on the experience in order to notice and relish it to the greatest extent possible can make it even more enjoyable (University of Michigan, 2013).

The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research (2020) published the *Educator Resilience and Trauma-Informed Self-Care Self-Assessment and Planning Tool*. This tool “includes a self-care self-assessment with key strategies for fostering resilience and a self-care planning tool to assist educators in identifying areas of strength and growth related to self-care and developing self-care plans” (2020, p. 1). Utilizing a tool such as this can help educators to realize areas where they are doing well in their wellness plans and areas in which they may need support. Another well-known tool for assessing quality is the *Professional Quality of Life Scale* or *ProQOL*, which can be found online at <http://www.proqol.org>.

### **Resiliency Through Social-Emotional Learning**

Once a personal wellness plan is in place for the educator, he or she will be in a better place emotionally to help students and begin to build their resilience plans. Resilience is defined as how well someone bounces back from a difficult situation (Raab, 2020). Those who are resilient can reframe a situation, or easily shift their perspective. Some individuals are innately more resilient, but resilience can be practiced and developed (Raab, 2020). One way to help practice and develop resilience is through social-emotional learning.

The Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading research organization for social-emotional development. CASEL’s mission is “to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school” (n. d. a.). CASEL provides an SEL framework that fosters knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (n. d. b). Resilience falls under the competency of self-management, and includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals (n. d. b.).

The first step in teaching resilience is having students identify what it is. A good starting place is mindfulness lessons. Mindfulness is simply bringing attention to the present moment, having students think about what is happening to them without being distracted or judging how they are feeling. There are various techniques for teaching mindfulness. Some of the most used include deep breathing, meditation, guided imagery, and gratitude practice. Integrating these mindfulness practices into the classroom can help students focus.

Cognitive behavioral therapy techniques help students learn ways to reframe their thinking and shift their perspectives. Cognitive restructuring is the process by which students change how they view the world. It focuses on challenging and correcting negative thinking patterns and is based on the idea that irrational thoughts or beliefs about events often lead to distorted emotions and behaviors. Teaching students the relationship among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors helps them understand how to reframe thoughts that may cause them stress and anxiety. As educators work with students on reframing thoughts, it is important to prioritize the premise that students understand that negative thoughts can produce negative behavior. Encourage students to view thoughts from another's perspective. Using questioning methods helps them discover problematic thoughts, understand why they are problematic, and identify errors in reasoning. The authors of *Result Coaching* remind us that when educators practice committed listening, they help students clarify their intended results. Then, students can clearly state their issues and understand the process deeper (Kee et al., 2010). Once the understanding of irrational and problematic thinking is in place, students can undertake activities that replace those thoughts with balanced and rational thoughts.

Generalization of the skills learned through these techniques for use in other environments allows students to apply these skills for other purposes and understand their use in other circumstances.

### **Leadership to Support Social-Emotional Learning**

Emotional Intelligence (EI) leadership is the leader's "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). EI is a leadership framework that most often accompanies other leadership theories to create a culture centered around trust and empathy. Due to the ever-changing environment that the current pandemic created for school organizations, EI is an essential leadership quality necessary to support the emotional needs of organizations seeking to sustain a positive school culture. Daniel Goleman, the author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, aggregated data from multiple studies and found that strong, emotionally intelligent leaders can manage their own emotions, perceive how people are feeling, see things from others' perspectives, and work as a team (Dearlove, 2003).

In the text of *Maxed Emotions: An interview with Daniel Goleman*, Dearlove (2003) asked Goleman, "How much of EI is determined before adulthood?" (p. 27) Goleman's response was, "The roots of each of these abilities start early in life" (p. 27). Knowing EI starts early in life, it is important that EI leaders create an environment where both adults and children better understand themselves, their current surroundings, and each other.

As we know, there is no playbook for leaders in dealing with a global trauma and how it affects the organizations over time. Therefore, it is important to lean heavily on the social and emotional learning strategies that many researchers have implemented in schools. Dr. Marc

Brackett, the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and author of *Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive*, addressed why understanding emotions is important for a school leader. An EI leader understands emotions affect our ability to pay attention (Rim, 2020). An example Brackett provided in the interview with Rim (2020) was a student's inability to do homework due to anxiety after hearing or reading a report about the current global trauma. A strong EI leader must be aware of such correlations and provide guidance to teachers and staff on how to support students as they encounter information that can affect the students' ability to pay attention.

Another factor an EI leader must be aware of is that emotions affect our decision-making skills, performance, and creativity (Rim, 2020). Our emotions can hijack our executive functioning skills and impact the way teachers and staff respond to decision making. An EI leader must be aware of the impact emotions make on decision making and provide opportunities to investigate multiple approaches to addressing the needs of students and adults during a crisis situation.

Brackett also reminds us of the importance of one's health both physically and mentally (Rim, 2020). EI leaders display empathy and are emotionally attuned with others and create opportunities to support both physical and mental health. One way a leader can do this is by creating challenges and game-like activities for the adults. Once adults are healthy (physically and mentally), they are better equipped to support the physical and mental health of the students.

Finally, one of the main premises of EI is relationships. An EI leader understands the impact emotions have on relationships (Rim, 2020). First and foremost, the organization must have strong communication lines built on trust and open communication. An EI leader builds strong relationships through inspiring, coaching, capitalizing on differences, and building strong teams (Dugan, 2017). Through a relational approach, one learns to meet the diverse needs of the organization and its people and learns (Cherniss and Roche, 2020). Cherniss and Roche (2020) provided nine strategies to help leaders lead with feeling. The nine strategies include: monitor the emotional climate, express your own feelings to motivate others, examine your own behaviors and how they influence others, put yourself in others' shoes, find the underlying emotional dynamics of the organization, reframe your thinking, create optimal relationships, seek out others to help manage emotions, and ultimately help others increase their own emotional intelligence. These strategies are developed through committed listening, having empathy, and a deep level of trust between the members.

## Conclusion

As one can see, an EI leader compliments the five key components of SEL which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlak et. al 2011). An impactful EI leader supports a positive school climate that develops people-centered skills throughout the organization (adults and students) that work collaboratively to effectively manage unstable environments created by global trauma. A school-wide structure led by emotional intelligence provides a place where all stakeholders can thrive no matter what they encounter.

The long-term impacts of Covid-19 on people and societies are yet to be known. However, its stress has already caused adults, adolescents, and children to show evidence of trauma. Focusing efforts on teaching social and emotional skills, such as resiliency, can help our students learn valuable and relevant coping skills that will help them well into the future. The efforts will

also assist educators with their own wellness. An emotionally intelligent lens can help everyone who is being burdened with the numerous stressors happening in the world right now.

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