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The Importance of Teacher Self-Care

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The Importance of Teacher Self-Care

**Shannon Szymczak, Instructional Coach
Meeker Middle School, Tacoma, Washington**

We plan, we teach, but we are never prepared for everything our students bring with them into our classrooms. At least, I wasn't prepared for what happened in my classroom in April of 2017.

One morning in my third period class, one of my 7th grade students took out a box-knife, slitting her neck in front of myself and her twenty-four classmates. Reacting in shock, I grabbed the knife from her hands and rushed her to the nurse, where staff put pressure on her neck to try to stop the bleeding until paramedics came and took her to the hospital.

As I sat there on the floor in the school nurse's office, I couldn't stop shaking. I remember staring at my knee, wondering why it was bouncing so much. I spoke to a counselor and tried to talk through what had just happened. My principal called my mother to drive me home. I cried, in shock, the entire way, reliving that moment again and again.

My student recovered, and eventually I did, too. But I struggled for months after the incident, and at times I wondered whether I'd ever be able to return to the classroom. Before I could, I needed to learn that I cannot be the teacher my students need me to be if I don't take care of myself, first.

Coming to Terms with My Own Self-Care

Self-care is defined as "the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health." I didn't abide by that. As a teacher, I saw my job as taking care of my students. I educated them, fed them, stood up for them, challenged them, listened to them...it was always about *them*. I thought this is the way it's supposed to be, as many teachers put their students first. That's just who we are. It's what we do!

But what I wasn't doing was listening to myself.

Only a few months prior to that April morning, I'd returned from maternity leave. I was a sleep-deprived working mom, and in hindsight I realize I was suffering from undiagnosed Postpartum Depression and Anxiety. But I put that aside and focused on my child at home and my students at school, continuing my focus on what was best for them. Sure, I took a nap when I could, but I sure didn't talk about my thoughts and feelings. I didn't set any boundaries or take time for just me. I pushed forward.



The night of the incident, my mother took my son to her house, allowing me time to recover and process what I'd just witnessed. I laid on the couch watching TV, because that was my attempt at self-care at the time. I spoke to some people from school and made the decision that I would go to work the following day, for the kids.

Looking back, that was my biggest mistake. I knew it would be too much for me, but I went anyway because my life centered around my students. While I wasn't teaching that day, I was there in the hallways, the office, even my classroom where it had all happened. I was present for my students. I set aside my own trauma to try and show them I was okay. I wasn't there for myself. I listened to any student who needed to talk, and I took on all their trauma from the day before.

After school, I picked up my son, returned home and experienced my first panic attack. I paced my bathroom with a feeling of cold electricity running through my arms. My 7-month-old son cried for me, sending me even more over the edge. My husband ran him to the neighbors, came back and threw a few blankets on me, squeezing me tight. We sat on the floor for what felt like an eternity, until my panic subsided. I called my best friend, a nurse, who explained to me what I was experiencing. It was one of the worst nights of my life.

I didn't teach for the final two months of that school year, experiencing multiple panic attacks. I couldn't step foot in that classroom, let alone be in that hallway. I attended numerous therapy sessions, tried medications, and began journaling after some prompting by my principal, who coached me through the whole ordeal. I had to learn a lesson about self-care the hard way, an extreme way, really.

Reset and Restart

I know my story is not a common one, but there are plenty of teachers out there who felt, and still feel, the same way I did. They want to do right by their students, because they see the trauma they experience daily. They want to educate them, feed them, stand up for them, challenge them, and listen to them. But it can't always be about them. If we aren't careful, we take on all that trauma ourselves. It wears us down.

I'm not saying that I wouldn't have missed the final two months of school had I taken the time to heal myself before walking back into that building, but my gut says that had I taken the time to care for myself first, to preserve my own health, I might have been able to be there for my students the rest of that year. I know its cliché to say that we must take care of ourselves before we can take care of others, but it's the reality.

Now I take the time to listen to myself and set boundaries. If I need to, I spend time alone after school, sometimes meditating, working out, going to therapy, or journaling. It doesn't matter what it is I choose to do, as long as I am proactively taking the time and actively listening to myself.

We, as educators, require just as much care as our students. We must be aware of our mental health. We must feed our own souls, stand up for our own needs, challenge our own minds, and listen to what our bodies are telling us. We deserve to be 'whole teachers' even as we work to teach the whole child.



As an NBCT Instructional Coach and AVID staff developer, Shannon Szymczak brings a wealth of experience to her role as instructional coach at Meeker Middle School in the Tacoma, Washington Public Schools. Her passion for education and her dedication to supporting teachers' well-being drives her commitment to fostering a positive and sustainable teaching environment.



Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.

