



LIFESTYLE

How Educators Can (Really, Honestly) Unplug – And How Stress Affects Us

By Jennifer Gunn

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Between grading papers, lesson planning, and that extra-special energy students are buzzing with, it's super difficult for teachers to actually unplug – but it's so important that we do. Here's why, followed by tips that will do dedicated educators a lot of good. Remember, self-care is truly an act of kindness to yourself!

Why it matters – how stress affects our lives

Stress is often just a way of life, but when we turn our backs on stress management, we open the door to potentially dangerous health effects and we're less effective as educators. [Dr. Ryan Fuller, Clinical Director at New York Behavioral Health](#) shares that "out-of-control stress can chronically activate our fight-or-flight response. Having our sympathetic nervous system constantly on alert like that wreaks havoc on our bodies, putting us at risk for physical illness." Living in a constant state of fatigue, anxiety, and stress shouldn't just be the norm. Long-term stress causes an elevation in stress hormones like cortisol, causing mood killers, and health issues like "carb cravings, reduced libido, high blood pressure, and increased fat around our waists." So while educators tend to care for everyone else first, that important work is much harder to do when not functioning at your best.

Strategy 1: Practice mindfulness

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intentionally how we want to respond to our stress," says [Dr. Ellie Cobb](#), holistic psychologist and mindfulness and meditation teacher. A continuous practice of pausing to assess your emotional state, calming your breathing, and consciously deciding how to proceed helps slow down reactivity and helps you feel more in control of your decisions and emotions. "Breathing intentionally with long deep breaths or with alternate nostril breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, allowing the body to release and relax. When the body's nervous system relaxes, it also calms the mind," Cobb says. Mindfulness requires practice and consistency, but it can be done at any time — even in that endless staff meeting. Slow down your breathing, check in with your emotions, and decide how to proceed, and you just might find yourself a bit less frantic.

Strategy 2: Get a change of scenery

Home to school... school to the supermarket... market to home... When we get busy, we often travel the same path every day. In doing so, we see the same things and the same people and can get stuck in thought patterns that feel confining. A simple change of scenery can do wonders for pushing the reset button of your mind and shaking loose the monotony and stress of daily habits. While a week-long vacation to the Caribbean would definitely do the trick, setting out on a simple walk through the park, visiting a nearby beach, or taking a scenic drive can shake things up and help you de-stress. Break free from the day-to-day thought patterns and set your eyes upon a new vista. Breathe, visualize, dream, and think somewhere different than your usual sites. Take a lesson from Einstein, "Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better."

Strategy 3: Focus on some serious self-care

Educators are experts in helping others, but tend to put themselves last when it comes to being kind and giving to themselves. Acts of self-care, done with regularity, lower stress and help keep us physically and mentally healthy. "These are things that most of us neglect because they may seem too luxurious," says [Dr. Susan Grace](#), a psychotherapist who works for the New York City Department of Education. "Going for a massage would certainly fall into this category. You could take an extra-long shower, or even take a bath and use some nice aromatherapy product. You could give yourself a foot massage." While seemingly small, engaging in these activities sends a clear message to your mind, according to Dr. Grace. "From a cognitive standpoint, they relay the message that it is OK to be self-compassionate. They say, 'I can be loving and generous to myself.'" So go ahead, put aside the grading and take that bath, get that massage, or just get cozy with a book.

Strategy 4: Make plans with friends

Teaching is exhausting. By Friday night, most educators are zapped, and an evening of Netflix and pajamas sounds pretty great. But it's important to make time for socializing. Psychology Today says, "Interacting with others boosts feelings of well-being and decreases feelings of [depression](#)." And a 2011 study by the Society for Research in Child Development found that participants who were with their best friends during unpleasant experiences logged lower cortisol levels than the rest of the participants in the study. Humans need each other, and sharing your woes and your joys with friends lightens the stress load you carry alone. Take time to hang out with friends, even if you're tired or busy. Make socializing a priority. Join a group, set up a weekly dinner, or you can even do that Netflix and pajamas time thing together.

Strategy 5: LOL

Laughter is a proven stress-reducer, as it increases your inhalation of oxygen-filled air and stimulates your heart, lungs, and circulatory systems, releasing endorphins and soothing muscle tension. Laughter has long-term benefits too. According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), "Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts can actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more serious illnesses." Find yourself scowling from stress? Laugh it off and, if you have to, get deliberate about it. Watch a funny show, go see some comedy, get silly with friends, or watch some funny pet videos on YouTube.

Our nonstop plugged-in world is driving us to distraction. A study out of University of Gothenburg, Sweden, tells us that abundant computer and cell phone use has led to a sharp increase in sleep disorders, mental illness, and stress. Sound like you? Start by turning off your devices — at least sometimes. “First, we need at least an hour before bed when we are not looking at or around our brightly lit devices. Technology devices wake us up and interrupt our circadian rhythms, making it difficult to sleep,” says Dr. Grace. She also recommends charging your phone outside of your bedroom or putting it on airplane mode while having unplugged time. Setting aside dedicated unplugged times also helps to manage tech crawl and wasted hours spent scrolling through social media. Use that WiFi-free time to read, relax, socialize, spend time with family, rest, or do non-digital activities to calm your system. Come up with an unplugged schedule and stick to it!

Strategy 7: Schedule your work time and fun time

When we get busy, we can so easily forget that it’s not only OK but mandatory to take time to relax. While it may seem strange to schedule relaxation time, it’s equally strange that it’s become normal to get so busy that we forget to relax entirely. So plan out your downtime. Create a nightly cut-off time when you shut down work, unplug the internet, and truly relax. Plan at least one weekend day — or half a day! — where relaxation and fun are prioritized. Plan out your time for school responsibilities like grading and planning and give equal planning priority to your personal time. Need sleep? Plan out naps and pick a sleep-late day. Set alarms to remind yourself of your downtime and stick to it.

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Need help planning to stress less?

Here are some ways to implement some thoughtful planning habits to manage your work time and personal time. Check out these awesome planners to help you manage work, play, health, and your passions for less stress!

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Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teaching coach, and high school educator in New York City. She is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation, and regularly presents at conferences on the topics of adolescent literacy, leadership, and education innovation.



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