

Transition back to school: Staff wellbeing

Returning to school after a global pandemic is something that none of us have ever experienced before. The uncertainty has been unsettling and caused many to feel mixed emotions about firstly going into lockdown and now emerging from lockdown. Many feel relieved to be returning to a new “normal” and gaining some routine and certainty back into our lives. Whereas for others this is provoking much anxiety.

For the majority, lockdown has allowed us to put a pause on our lives and for the first time provided that opportunity to slow down and connect. This has also allowed us to reflect on our own wellbeing and for many prioritise our wellbeing.

What is Wellbeing?

The following definition comes from Education Scotland’s Connected Compassionate Communities resource.

The concept of wellbeing comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement....equally important...experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.

Huppert, (2009)

Looking after your own wellbeing

With a return to schools in August, it is of paramount importance that those in caring roles like parents, carers, teachers and support staff, not only support the wellbeing of our children, but also look after the wellbeing of self. Worries, pressures and unpredictability can have a detrimental impact on wellbeing impacting on our ability to care, connect, support and teach our young people. We know that you cannot support others’ wellbeing if you are not prioritising your own wellbeing.



If we do not support our own wellbeing we become at risk of reaching burnout or developing compassion fatigue (Fidgley, 2002). Compassion fatigue refers to physical or emotional exhaustion that impacts on your ability to look after others and it normally develops as a result of caring for others. To avoid burnout and compassion fatigue we must look after ourselves and put our wellbeing at the centre in order to reduce the stress and anxiety we may experience on this journey to renewal.

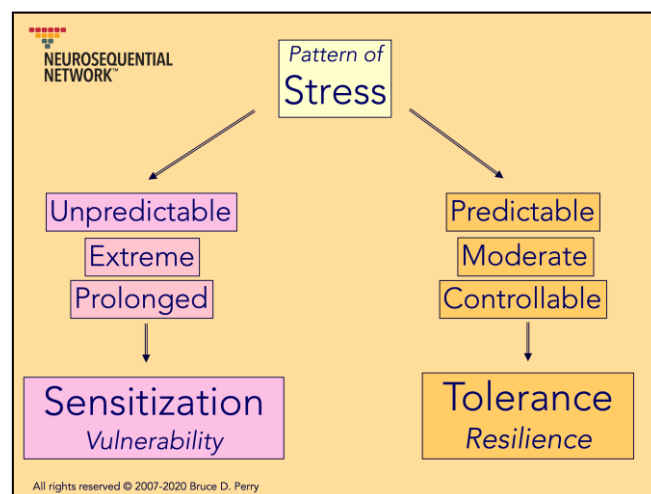


What is Stress?

Stress is a survival mechanism. It helps our bodies get ready to react in a situation if there is danger. For example, if you are driving and a car is coming towards you, you need to feel fear/ terror to allow your brain to kick in and help you to act to avoid the danger.

It can also be good in small doses to get you ready for delivering that presentation or attending that difficult meeting as it allows us to be alert. Manageable doses of stress can help us to effectively convey our message, to think about what is coming next and to be alert to any questions we might receive. It can help us meet that deadline that we never thought we could possibly meet.

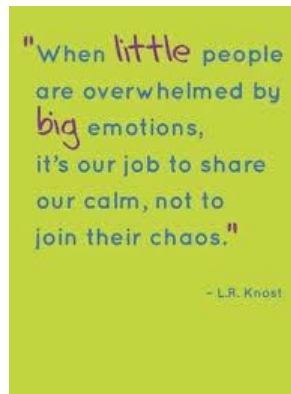
If stress is predictable, moderate and controllable then over time this can actually be a good thing as it can help us foster resilience. However, what we do know is that if stress is unpredictable and prolonged (like a global pandemic) it can mean our tolerance to stress can be reduced and we need others to help us be calm and remain resilient.



Bruce Perry (2020) The Neurosequential Network

However, if we start to become vulnerable to stress it can mean that we are not able to access the parts of our brain that we need to be able to think, problem solve, sequence and plan. If we are stressed we tend to be in the emotional and reactive part of our brains called the limbic system. That can mean we find it more difficult to think creatively, abstractly and be receptive to the needs and wants of others.

We are at our best when we are calm. We can access the thinking, abstract parts of our brain. We are better able to attune to our own needs and the needs of others. Therefore, going back to school, how do we maintain that sense of calm for us and our children?



If we have an adult that is not calm or dysregulated then what that means is they are more likely to make other children or adults feel that way. What we need to be able to do is spread a sense of calm. What do we need to do in order to keep that sense of calm and keep our wellbeing at the centre?

How do we keep ourselves calm and regulated?

To help keep ourselves calm we need to engage in repetitive rhythmic experiences. How many of you have spent lockdown clearing out cupboards, tidying, cooking, painting, singing, reading? These are all regulating experiences that help keep us calm. It is important to plan these throughout the day for yourselves and your children. Perry (2020) says even 3 minute intervals of this type of activity can be enough to keep us in a calm state.

When we are highly stressed we can often need someone we know and trust to help us to calm down. That might be through listening to our worries, labelling our emotions and helping us feel heard. We do not need someone to "fix or rescue".

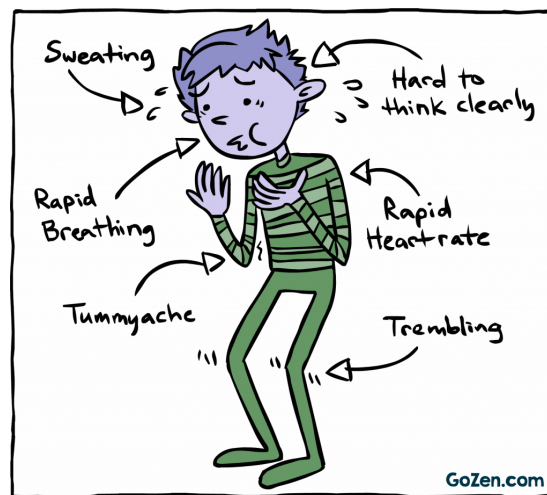
After we have been regulated and had someone relate to us, then we can begin to reason and problem solve.

This means that when we are stressed we find it harder to think, problem solve and be creative.

How do we make sure that staff are aware of their own wellbeing needs and what do they need to help prioritise and intervene, when required?

How do we know when we are stressed?

The first signs of stress can be physical symptoms. However, these can manifest differently from one individual to another, so it is important to understand and recognise your own warning signs. It is helpful to note these down and can even be helpful to do it with family members or with children in your class. What are the first things you notice about them when they are beginning to become stressed? What do they notice?



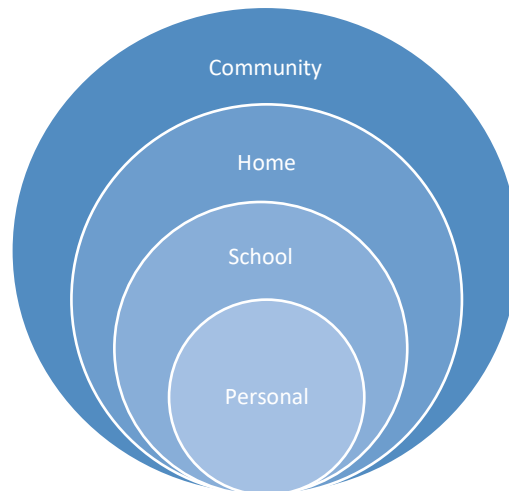
Signs of Stress and compassion fatigue

Being in a caring role can be both rewarding and exhausting and if we do not look after our own wellbeing we can become at risk of developing compassion fatigue as noted earlier. What are the signs that we may be starting to feel compassion fatigue? Some signs are listed below. This is not extensive or exclusive and will be personal to each individual person. In order to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue we need to think about our wellbeing across a range of levels.



Systems for Supporting staff well-being

A recent survey by East Ayrshire Psychological Services (2020) gathered staff ideas on how they support their own wellbeing in school.



They stated that lockdown had meant that they had to focus on their own wellbeing and were worried about how to maintain this going forward to the transition back to schools, which will be more important than ever. It is important to develop your own personal plan about what helps you cope when you are stressed and protect time to engage in these activities.

School Systems: Some Ideas for promoting wellbeing

1. Ethos and culture of promoting staff wellbeing
2. Protected time for supervision from managers on a regular basis that suits the school
3. Informal check ins from management
4. Regular collegiate check ins
5. Wellbeing activities like walking lunches, after school workouts
6. Ensuring that time to connect and be together at natural break times
7. Create a social committee to arrange protected/regular staff room meet ups at lunch time or after school to catch up informally and have a treat
8. Wonderwall or positivity boards in the staff room to note down good feedback
9. Laugh a lot and create a good ethos
10. Using technology to maintain that connection e.g., Whatsapp, Microsoft teams. Think about how we keep some of that practice from lockdown to help maintain connections.
11. Implement pamper activities like peer massage, reiki

*“The most powerful buffer in times of stress and distress is our social connectedness; so let’s all remember to **stay physically distant but emotionally close**. Reach out and connect; even a short text or smiling face on zoom can help.” (Bruce Perry, 2020)*

Resources for Supporting Staff Wellbeing

2.5.8 Resources for staff wellbeing and learning

- Hays Education offer a free [Wellbeing First pack](#) to help teachers and support staff through the difficult period of adapting to working with Covid-19 consideration. There are a range of new online courses around the best practice for remote working and wellbeing.

- The NES (2020) **Wellbeing Planning Tool** can also be used to support conversations and planning about staff wellbeing and supports.



- [Looking after our mental wellbeing](#) (NHS Ayrshire and Arran, 2020) document provides lots of information and tools to support our wellbeing.



- A [wakelet](#) with links to various web resources. Provides support and advice in five areas known to positively impact on health and wellbeing.



A series of **virtual events** known as [Education Scotland Big Blethers](#) will aim to support education professionals to connect, share and collaborate.



[Scotland Learns](#) provides a range of ideas and suggestions of activities to help parents, carers and practitioners support learning at home.



The EIS has provided online advice, resources and support including a new '[Working at Home](#)' resource. It currently contains 4 main sections: Looking After Your Health and Wellbeing; Making Time for You: Daily Inspiration; Lockdown Learning Ideas; and Continuing Your Professional Learning.



[Webinar sessions](#) on Glow Scotland to support and upskill practitioners in digital learning and teaching (live and on YouTube).

South Ayrshire Psychological Services (2020)

References

Bruce Perry (2020) *Neurosequential Network – Covid 19 series*. Retrieved on 29th June 2020 from <https://www.neurosequential.com/covid-19-resources>

East Ayrshire Psychological Service (2020) Survey: *What systems are in place in your school to support Staff Well-being?*

Figley, Charles (Ed) (2002). *Treating compassion fatigue*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Hubbert, Felicia A (2009) *Psychological Well-being: Evidence Regarding its Causes and Consequences*. Journal of Applied Psychology Health and Wellbeing, Volume 1, Issue 2. Retrieved on 29th June 2020 from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01008.x> -

South Ayrshire Psychological Services (2020) *A Relational Approach to Supporting the Re-opening of Schools and Early Years Centres Post Pandemic Lockdown*. Retrieved on 29th June 2020 from https://www.eps.south-ayrshire.gov.uk/images/Return_to_Schools_FINAL.pdf