Ways to Prevent Burnout and Reduce Stress: Self-Care Techniques

"Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners" -William Shakespeare

Educators often face high demands, long days and high stress. Coupled with repetitive tasks and feeling undervalued, educators are highly susceptible to burnout. It can be difficult for anyone to perform at their best when trying to function under these conditions. Incorporating self-care techniques into your lifestyle can help prevent burnout and reduce stress.

Burnout typically develops gradually as a result of prolonged stress. When a person is experiencing burnout, they tend to feel unappreciated and disengaged at work. They may also feel pessimistic, hopeless and lack enjoyment in their work. They may also be irritable and not performing to their potential. Burnout can occur when a person feels overworked, lack control or flexibility in their work, or their work is unchallenging. There are numerous physical and emotional signs of burnout.

Symptoms of Burnout include:

- Chronic fatigue
- Insomnia
- Impaired focus and forgetfulness
- Feelings of depression or guilt
- Experience early signs of anxiety
- Physical symptoms: chest pain, headaches, heart palpitations and gastrointestinal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Impaired Immune System

Stress is the body's natural response to threats also known as the flight or fight response. Though stress is natural, too much stress can be harmful. Common causes of stress include major life changes, relationship challenges, heavy workloads and financial concerns. Pessimism, perfectionism and negative self-talk can also lead to stress. Symptoms of Stress include:

- Memory problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Muscle aches and pains
- Nausea
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Agitation or anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Impaired Immune System
- Eating too much or too little
- Difficulty sleeping

The signs of burnout and stress are fairly similar to one another, however burnout symptoms tend to be more mental and stress symptoms tend to be more physical. According to helpguide.org, "Excessive stress is like drowning in responsibility, burnout is being all dried up." Both can be difficult to detect. It is important to listen to your body and take time for yourself to prevent burnout or chronic stress.

There are numerous self-care options to cope with burnout and chronic stress. Begin with these basics: eat well, exercise 3 or more times a week and sleep 7-8 hours a night. There are several self-care activities that can be completed in a few minutes or a few hours depending on your needs. The key to success is to find techniques that work for you. Don't be afraid to try a new technique if you don't feel a reduction in your symptoms.

There are quick self-care techniques that can be completed at work when work seems overwhelming or when you are feeling defeated. Take a couple minutes to write down one to three strengths or things that you appreciate about yourself. Another option is to try short mindfulness exercises, like breathing, throughout the day to shift your focus inward and give you a break from the stresses around you. Close your eyes, take deep breaths and channel your thoughts to the feeling of your chest rising and falling. This inward focus will help you clear your mind and relax. Breathing techniques can be done over the lunch hour to reenergize you through the rest of the day. If breathing does not work for you, there are dozens of other exercises to try.

What do I do for self-care?   2015-03-18c

- Get plenty of sleep
- Enjoy sunshine
- Cook
- Write or draw (think out loud)
- Talk to myself
- Cuddle cats
- Walk or bike (esp. in a park)
- Tidy
- Read
- Read about people whose lives are more complicated
- Garden
- Get a hug
- Talk to select people

There are different types of self-care activities such as, sensory, spiritual, emotional, physical and social to name a few. Self-care can also be done individually as a way to connect with yourself or with others. Exercise, like a walk, running or yoga can clear your mind and reduce stress. Journaling or writing down things you are grateful for are beneficial spiritual exercises. Other activities include spending time with a friend or family member, volunteering, reading, cooking or completing a crossword puzzle. There are several self-care activities, for more ideas please visit one of these websites:

https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/shyness-is-nice/201403/seven-types-self-care-activities-coping-stress

http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/taking-good-care-yourself

For many busy adults, it can be easy to focus all of your time and energy on your family and career, but self-care is essential. If self-care is not currently part of your routine, start with the basics and slowly incorporate other techniques. Schedule 15 minutes a day for yourself either first thing in the morning or right before bed. Making self-care part of your routine can increase your well-being and increase connectedness at work and with those around you.

Sources:

https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/preventing-burnout.htm

https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them

https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-causes-and-effects.html

SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate is best described as the school conditions that influence a student's learning.

Schools all across the country, in every state, serve students from a multitude of diverse backgrounds. Each student brings their unique cultures, beliefs, personalities and experiences.

According to a survey done by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the recent presidential election led directly to "heightened anxiety on the part of marginalized students, including immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and LGBT students." Other research also indicates a rise in hate speech and bullying behaviors directed towards minority students. In January of 2017, a cyberbullying researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire released data showing an increase in the number of high school students being bullied because of their race or skin color compared to previous years.

Everyday acts of intolerance manifest themselves in many ways: name-calling, slurs, sexual harassment, put-downs regarding race, ethnicity, gender, size, abilities, perceived sexual orientation or gender identification. As we know, growing intolerance can also be found online, posted on social media sites.

In many cases, these intolerant acts are intentional, while other times they are not. Of course, many times, the issue is less about intent and more about impact. Because no matter the intention, these messages and behaviors can cause fear, damage and injury to individuals and the entire school community.

One way to safeguard against this is through inclusive education where we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs and activities so that all students learn and participate together. Through these thoughtful actions we can achieve a positive school climate where all students feel safe, included, and accepted.

Because school climate plays a vital role in addressing and changing behaviors and attitudes that produce bullying and threatening learning environments, it is important to cultivate and promote positive, inclusive, respectful behavior and interactions in schools and classrooms.

Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs and activities so that all students learn and participate together. Through these thoughtful actions, we can achieve a positive school climate where all students feel safe, included, and accepted.

Moreover, a positive school climate fosters safety; promotes a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encourages and maintains respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community.

The following are some of the characteristics associated with a positive school climate:

- Students, staff members and parents feel safe, included and accepted within the school.
- Members of the school community demonstrate respect, fairness and kindness in their interactions, and build healthy relationships that are free from discrimination and harassment.
- Students are encouraged and given support to be positive leaders and role models in their school community; for example, by speaking up about issues such as bullying and harassment.
- Students, principals, staff members, parents and community members have open and ongoing discussions where all member are actively engaged and respected.
- Strategies for bullying prevention and intervention and awareness are reinforced for students and staff.
- The learning environment, instructional materials, and teaching and assessment strategies reflect the diversity of all learners.
- Every student is motivated and given support to succeed in an environment of high expectations, such as school.

It should be further noted, a positive school climate is significantly related to school success. According to much research, a positive school climate can improve attendance, achievement, and retention and even rates of graduation.

For more information on inclusive, positive school climate please visit the websites below.

Sources:

*www.**inclusion**bc.org/our-priority-areas/**inclusive-education**/what-**inclusive-education***

*https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/**school-climate***

*www.**schoolclimate**.org*

www.tolerance.org

Depression: There is Help, there is Hope

Adolescence can be a time of turmoil and uncertainty due to the many changes that take place in a young person's life due to hormones, puberty, peer pressure, identity issues and normal "growing pains". Differentiating between "normal" teenage moodiness and true symptoms of depression can be challenging for parents, teachers and other adult caregivers. While a certain amount of moodiness and acting out is a normal part of adolescent development, persistent changes in personality, mood or behavior that result in intense feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anger or frustration over longer periods of time (weeks, months or longer), may be a red flag for a deeper problem.

While research shows that the actual prevalence of depression is underestimated, recent 2015 data indicates that 12.5% of youth ages 12-17 had a major depressive episode during the past year. Only 39% of these youth received treatment (Child Trends Data Bank, 2016). Additionally, nearly one third (30%) of students in grades 9-12 reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for an extended period of time (two or more weeks in a row) in the last year (Child Trends Data Bank, 2016). Data specific to Nebraska found that 1 in 4 high school students reported being depressed during the past 12 months and female students were more than twice as likely as male students to report depression (NE Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2016). This data highlights the importance of both recognizing and understanding child and adolescent depression as a means to help support those students who may be struggling. According to a definition from Mayo Clinic (2017), "depression signs and symptoms include a change from a person's previous attitude and behavior that can cause significant distress and problems at school or home, in social activities or other areas of life". Such changes in emotions and behavior may include:

Emotional Changes:

- Feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- Irritable or annoyed mood
- Frustration or feelings of anger
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- Loss of interest in or conflict with, family and friends
- Low self-esteem
- Fixation on past failures or exaggerated self-blame
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure, and the need for excessive reassurance
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions or remembering things
- Ongoing sense that life and the future are bleak

Behavioral Changes:

- Tiredness and loss of energy
- Insomnia or sleeping too much
- Changes in appetite
- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Agitation or restlessness
- Frequent somatic complaints or visits to school nurse
- Social isolation
- Poor school performance or frequent absences from school
- Angry outbursts, disruptive or risky behavior
- Self-harm
- Making a suicide plan or attempt

Recognizing and guiding kids towards help is the first step in treating depression. Few kids will recognize their need for help on their own, so the role of a caring parent or adult can greatly influence a student's recovery. Emotional support along with professional help can go a long way.

How Parents and Caregivers can help:

- Watch for red flags
- If concerned, help the individual get an appropriate diagnosis and treatment
    - Treatment can include: Psychotherapy, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Interpersonal Therapy and Medication
    - Understand that treatment may take time for symptoms to decrease and may also include seeking a different form of treatment if no improvement occurs
- Offer continuous emotional support (understanding, patience, affection and encouragement)
- Focus on listening, not lecturing
- Encourage social time with supportive friends
- Make sure he/she is getting plenty of sleep and exercise
- Set aside quality time to talk face to face each day.
- Provide a safe place for he/she to talk about their feelings

It is important to remember that the behaviors of a depressed child or adolescent may look different than that of a depressed adult. For example, while adults may appear more sad and withdrawn, irritability, aggression and anger may be more noticeable symptoms in tweens and teens. Similarly, depression can manifest differently for each individual. It is not always those kids that withdraw socially, appear sad and experience a decline academically that may be struggling. Depression can strike anyone, including the overachieving, highly involved student who may be internally struggling with high expectations of success.   Those kids who may not be identified "at risk" or who may find it difficult to self-identify need to be on our radar too. As with all mental illness, depression doesn't

discriminate and we must be open to checking in with all kids about their emotional and mental health. Opening up lines of communication can make it easier to spot those who may not exhibit the typical symptoms but who may be struggling quietly with depression.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; www.mayoclinic.org; www.helpguide.org; The National Institute of Mental Health; Child Trends Data Bank (2016); Nebraska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2016)