
(S.E.L)F CARE

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...if the walls are beginning to slowly close in during our collective isolation, Miriam Miller (a researcher and educational consultant, and PhD candidate in UBC's Human Development, Learning and Culture program, in the Faculty of Education) shares...



After experiencing a disrupted sense of community, many of us are left wondering how to maintain and nurture the community we had, so that we are not left re-establishing everything anew when we (eventually) return to our school buildings. As leaders, we are often quick to extend ourselves, reaching out to offer support to those around us. But, if you're anything like the rest of us, your internal resources are likely somewhat depleted. Over the past month, I have experienced a rollercoaster of emotions as I navigate this new and uncertain context of working from home while co-parenting and supporting my child's home-learning. Phew, it's draining! I've never had so many opportunities to practice my emotion regulation strategies!

In the midst of everything, I've found it helpful to turn to the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) for evidence-based insights to foster connection and belonging, while supporting social and emotional well-being.

According to the field of SEL, the first step in promoting community and connection, is to start with our S.E.L.f (see what I did there?). We've heard it a million times—we must put on our own oxygen mask before moving to assist others. In a similar vein, I often share that a dysregulated adult cannot regulate or co-regulate a student, much like a dysregulated leader cannot effectively co-regulate and lead their community. So, what can we do to first attend to ourselves?

1 PRACTICE SELF-AWARENESS

Check-in throughout the day. Over the years, I have consciously built a mindful practice of asking myself how I'm doing throughout the day. At first, I had to set an alarm to remind myself to notice how I was feeling, what I was thinking about, and what my physiological cues were (e.g. what was my body telling me? Was my stomach in a knot? Were my shoulders tense?). For many years, I told myself I didn't have time for such nonsense and I was "effective" at pushing aside my emotions. But ignoring emotions does not negate their impact—they have a funny way of seeping out in our interactions with staff

or parents (or more likely, our partners), and impacting our ability to focus, be productive or even fall asleep. Emotions contain important information and, when we build a practice of noticing and understanding our emotions, we are better able to use them in ways to meet our goals. We need to recognize our emotions so we can effectively manage them. The simple act of naming our emotions is, in fact, an effective regulation strategy.

2 PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

We are human and we are experiencing a shared human experience. It's ok to feel frustrated, anxious, worried, scared, joyful or proud. Emotions are neither good nor bad—they simply are. I am reminded of Rumi's words, *"This being human is a guest house/every day a new arrival/A joy, a depression, a meanness.../Welcome and entertain them all!"* We need to give ourselves some space to feel a wide range of



emotions (sometimes within a very short time frame) and to experience them without judgment. Many of us are experiencing stress and anxiety which decreases our level of tolerance, often leading to more emotionality. We

need to allow ourselves to experience our emotions without judgment. We would do the same for our staff and colleagues, so we need to do the same for ourselves.

3 PRACTICE SELF-REGULATION

We can build a resilient community when we model healthy, effective regulation strategies. Right now, we have an opportunity to intentionally practice our emotion regulation strategies (you know, those same strategies we are always reminding our students to use? Yes, those ones!). I've found myself relying on several in-the-moment strategies like mindfulness or

positive self-talk (read: first noticing my negative self-talk/inner-critic and then reframing the narrative). I'm prone to perseverate and worry, so I've also found that some longer-term strategies like healthy distraction (knitting! I know, I'm a researcher and a knitter, nerd alert!) and (safe) physical activity (e.g. running) have helped to replenish some of my expended resources.

In a time when we want to reach out to problem-solve and support others, we may need a reminder to be gentle with ourselves. SEL is not the antidote to all that we face, but it's a great place to start as we begin to consider more deeply what it means to build and bravely lead our communities.

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