



# School Staff Wellbeing & Self-Care on Return to School

## Introduction

Everyone will respond to the current situation in different ways each person will have their own unique coping mechanisms. During this time it is especially important that school staff pay attention to and take proactive steps to promote their own wellbeing and self-care. The aim of this guidance document is to provide some useful pointers to school staff that can be used during this unprecedented time and to highlight other supports that are available.

Supporting staff is helped by fostering resilience using five key principles<sup>1</sup>:

- Promoting a sense of safety
- Promoting a sense of calm
- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy
- Promoting connectedness
- Promoting hope

## 1. Promoting a sense of SAFETY

Feeling safe helps to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety. The less stressed we are, the more we are able to think, plan, engage and learn.

The following can help promote a sense of safety:

**Process of re-integration :** For many students and staff alike, re-establishing everyday routines related to sleep, morning schedules, and following a timetable may be challenging and take time.

**Slow down to catch up:** It is important that staff are given time to 'catch up' with colleagues and pupils so that everyone can settle into a new routine and feel ready to engage. This should help all of the school community to feel more secure in the days and weeks on return to school and gives everyone time to settle in.

**Routines:** Routines create a sense of psychological safety by providing predictability. There will be a return to some routines that were there prior to school closures, while there may be many changes to routine also, taking into account public health guidance at the time. Taking time to establish a new routine with colleagues and pupils will help in a return to predictability.

**Be aware of your own boundaries:** Think about what you need to ensure that you feel safe physically, psychologically and emotionally.

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<sup>1</sup> This guidance is underpinned by the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007) for supporting resilience during and after traumatic events

**Look after yourself:** Ensure that you are eating well, getting enough sleep and getting some form of physical exercise.

## 2. Promoting a sense of CALM

Promoting a sense of calm ensures that we have the ability to become peaceful in mind and body. Being able to relax and stay composed helps us to focus and concentrate on what we need to do.

The following can help promote a sense of calm:

### **Becoming more Self-Aware**

The spread of COVID-19 may have impacted on you in terms of your feelings, your thoughts and your behaviour. You may/may not feel strong reactions at different times during this period of adjustment. If your feelings and reactions seem different from those of others, remember everyone responds differently, and that's normal. At times, during this period of adjustment and change, you may notice that you are feeling/experiencing differences in:

- **How you think:** such as an inability to stop thinking about what is happening and trying to make sense of it.
- **How you feel physically:** You may feel extreme tiredness, or have gastrointestinal problems, headaches and other aches and pains, loss of appetite, and/or difficulty sleeping.
- **How you feel emotionally:** You may feel anxious or worried; irritable, cross or angry; you might sometimes feel numb.

**What you do:** You may notice that you are withdrawing from contact with loved ones; you may be exercising less or not taking as much care as you might have previously with what you eat; you may drink more alcohol.

### **Take time to relax**

- **Relaxation:** Take time each day to pay attention to your body and what it is telling you. Try to recognise when your body and mind are stressed. If you are feeling stressed or anxious, take a few deep breaths and concentrate on letting go of your worries even for a short time. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel. Further ideas and resources on relaxation can be found [here & here](#).

### 3. Promoting a sense of CONNECTEDNESS

Social connectedness involves having relationships with others (individual or groups) who understand you and support you. Building connections and relationships with colleagues and students provides the basis for engagement, emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn.

The following can help promote a sense of social connectedness:

**Relationships:** School staff consistently report that relationships with colleagues are essential to their wellbeing and self-care. Continuing to stay in touch with colleagues and friends is essential to support wellbeing at this time. Similarly the relationships that school staff have with their students have been shown to contribute positively to the wellbeing of both teachers and students (Split, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). It is also important to prioritise relationships outside of school to connect with family and friends.

**Maintain Work/Life Balance:** During this time it will be essential to develop new routines and structures throughout your day. This promotes feelings of safety and control. It is important to have clear boundaries between work and leisure time. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do at the present time.

**Creativity:** Do things that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive like gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something. *Creative Ireland* is an all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme that inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity. Consider how you might get creative with your students to support your own and their wellbeing at the present time.

### 4. Promoting a sense of EFFICACY in SELF and COMMUNITY

Self-efficacy is the belief that you can do what you need to do, deal with challenges and handle tough times. Community efficacy is the belief that the school community you belong to can do what it needs to do to thrive and take care of its members. As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, some people may feel a lack of control and may doubt their ability to solve problems and handle ordinary day-to-day challenges.

The following can help promote a sense of efficacy in self and community:

**Personal & Professional Development:** Teachers and school staff have had to adapt their suite of teaching methodologies in a very short period of time. This can generate understandable feelings of worry and uncertainty. School communities should recognise these feelings openly and encourage a professional culture which learns from both successes and failures. School staff should be encouraged to ask for help from a colleague when needed and should be supported in developing the new skills necessary to face the challenges of the new normal.

**Teacher wellbeing and self-care:** Support and encourage your colleagues to show compassion and kindness to themselves and others. Everyone will have had different experiences of the pandemic and it will take time to adjust to the 'new normal'. Remind them that not all individuals will respond to stress in the same way and each person will have their own unique coping mechanisms. It is especially important that school staff are proactive and look after their own wellbeing and self-care. Student wellbeing is influenced by the wellbeing of the adults around them. In preparation for the return to schools it is suggested that staff will benefit from:

- Dedicated time for staff reorientation and preparation prior to students' return
- Strategies to build staff wellbeing and resilience
- Knowing how and where to get help

## 5. Promoting a sense of HOPE

A sense of hope is related to fostering resiliency and the expectation that things will work out for the school community. Hope also includes a belief that others will be there to help.

The following can help promote a sense of hope:

**Emphasise strengths, hope, and positivity:** Schools can provide opportunities for the community to feel safe, secure, and hopeful about the present and future.

Talking about how they and staff in other schools found creative solutions to overcome challenges during the pandemic can be healing and reassuring for all.

**Steps to Promote Wellbeing & Self-Care:** Be kind and understanding of your own needs at this time. In times of stress it is especially important to focus and draw comfort from the people and things around you:

The ***Getting Through COVID-19 Together*** campaign was launched by the Government to provide support and resources to help deal with the stress, anxiety and isolation currently experienced by many people. The website provides tips and advice on topics such as **physical activity, parenting, coping with daily routines, supporting the 'cocooned' and getting involved in the community solidarity efforts**. It can be accessed [here](#). Research consistently shows that volunteering or other altruistic activities promotes wellbeing across the community. Consider completing the template in **Appendix 1** as part of your self-care plan.

**Seeking Help:** If you are feeling overwhelmed at the present time the **Employee Assistance Service**, provided by Spectrum.Life, can be contacted **at the number below**. The service offers a free confidential service 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, providing counselling on a range of personal health and wellbeing issues. They can also be contacted on WhatsApp and SMS by texting. Alternatively you can also Live Chat or Request a Call Back on the wellbeing portal and phone app.

**For further information and to contact Spectrum Life by:**

- Website: [www.spectrum.life](http://www.spectrum.life)
- Email: [eap@spectrum.life](mailto:eap@spectrum.life)
- Freephone Ire: 1800411057
- WhatsApp/SMS: text 'hi' to 087 3690010

### Useful Resources

- Many of the **Teaching Unions** have guidance and support relating to teacher wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic available on their websites.
- The **Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)** has a range of resources to support teacher wellbeing available [here](#).
- The **Centre for School Leadership (CSL)** has ideas and supports available for school principals and teachers [here](#)

### References

Duffield, S., & O'Hare, D. (2020). *Teacher resilience during coronavirus school closures*. British Psychological Society: Leicester.

Hobfoll SE, Watson P, Bell CC, Bryant RA, Brymer MJ, Friedman MJ, Ursano RJ. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*, 70(4), 283–315.

Spilt, J.L., Koomen, H.M.Y. & Thijs, J. (2011). Teacher Wellbeing: The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships. *Educational Psychology Review*, 23, 457-477.

## Appendix 1: Promoting Natural Resilience and Recovery

There are many small solutions or strategies you can use to support self-care in your daily life. One way to support your self-care is to promote your natural resilience and recovery by implementing individualised and achievable tasks in the areas of Safety, Calm, Connectedness, Efficacy and Hope (Hobfoll et al, 2007). Use the template below to reflect on how you are presently managing and caring for your wellbeing and then set some short-term or long-term goals to target each of the five areas to promote your resilience and wellbeing.

	Current practice	Future goals
<b>Safety</b> I protect my physical and psychological safety by...		
<b>Calm</b> I can practice strategies to promote calmness so I can use them y when needed...		
<b>Connectedness</b> I stay connected to family, to friends, to colleagues by...		
<b>Efficacy</b> I know I have and can cope well with challenges. Things I am proud of are...		
<b>Hope</b> My personal plan/goal for this year is...  My professional plan/goal for this year is...		

### Three things I am doing well to support my wellbeing

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

### Three things I plan to do that will support my wellbeing

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)