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# The Cycle of Student Trauma, Teacher Stress, and Teacher–Student Relational Support: A Case for Supporting Teachers’ Self-Care

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## Abstract

Students’ experiences of prior trauma may adversely affect their academic, social, and behavioral functioning in the classroom, resulting in necessary additional relational support from teachers. However, this additional support often depletes teachers’ personal resources, resulting in heightened levels of burnout and compassion fatigue. These teacher responses to stress can make it challenging to provide the increased relational support required to best support students who have experienced trauma, thus exacerbating students’ poor self-regulation and academic performance in the classroom, as well as teacher stress. This article reviews ways teachers can be supported in the development and maintenance of self-care practices and activities to reduce stress and burnout as well as explores avenues to foster meaningful teacher–student relationships and promote positive student outcomes.

Early adverse experiences, or traumatic events prior to age 18, have a powerful potential to negatively influence the trajectory of children’s lives in several domains of functioning, including socioemotional, behavioral, and cognitive self-regulation as well as academic achievement (e.g., Hanson et al., 2017; Heleniak et al., 2016; Panlilio et al., 2018; Teicher et al., 2016). These negative effects on students create a burden on teachers and can result in teacher burnout or compassion fatigue. Then, teacher burnout and compassion fatigue are likely to lead to lessened teacher–student relational support, which in turn may ultimately exacerbate the effects of traumatic events on students.

Thus, teachers are often caught in a vicious cycle of addressing the effects of student trauma and their own stress responses, leading to poor teacher–student relational support. Sustained self-care activities and practices can help mitigate this cycle by addressing feelings of burnout and compassion fatigue. Moreover, this article aims to (a) briefly review the effects of traumatic events on students and their need for increased relational support, (b) review how working with students who have experienced trauma places teachers at risk for burnout and compassion fatigue, (c) discuss how burnout and compassion fatigue can create a negative cycle of poor teacher–student relational support and negative student outcomes, (d) highlight the importance of self-care in mitigating the cycle of stress and trauma,

(e) briefly review domains and strategies of self-care, and (f) suggest ways teachers can be supported in their self-care practices.

## The Effect of Traumatic Events on Students

Early adverse or traumatic experiences include, but are not limited to, child maltreatment (i.e., physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and physical or emotional neglect); interpersonal violence in the home; living with an adult with mental health or substance abuse problems; death or absence of a caregiver; poverty; parental divorce; community and school violence; and natural disasters. Such traumatic events are a widespread and costly public health problem (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services [SAMHSA], 2014). In fact, the 2018–2019 National Survey of Children’s Health reported that approximately 22% of children from birth to 17 years of age have experienced at least one traumatic event, and approximately 18% have experienced two or more (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2019). Traumatic events can overwhelm a child’s capacity to cope (Lieberman & Knorr, 2007) and often culminate in long-lasting negative effects on a child’s development (SAMHSA, 2015). In the classroom context, poor self-regulation processes and academic challenges are two consequences of student-level trauma that require increased relational support (i.e., meaningful, close, safe relationships) from teachers.

Experiences of trauma can affect students’ socioemotional, behavioral, and cognitive self-regulation. In terms of socioemotional regulation, children who have experienced traumatic events demonstrate elevated emotional reactivity and impulsive reactions to stress (Heleniak et al., 2016), low emotion regulation (Schatz et al., 2008), problems understanding others’ emotional cues (Teisl & Cicchetti, 2008), and social problems (Jimenez et al., 2016). Challenges with socioemotional regulation may indicate that teachers need to support students who have experienced adversity by helping them understand the emotions of their peers as well as

identifying ways to react in non-disruptive ways.

In terms of behavior regulation, students who have experienced trauma are more likely to demonstrate externalizing and internalizing symptoms (Rosen et al., 2018; Hanson et al., 2017) as well as aggression (Teisl & Cicchetti, 2008). On the one hand, externalizing symptoms are often thought of as “acting out” and may include physical aggression, irritability, defiance, and temper tantrums. As such, students who have experienced trauma have been found to have more referrals to school social workers for behavior problems than their peers (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012). Teachers may need to design individual behavior management plans for these students and provide increased support to interrupt potentially dangerous behavior. Internalizing symptoms, on the other hand, may include crying, anxiety, depression, clinginess, and social withdrawal. Teachers may need to provide extra motivation for students to engage in schoolwork and provide structured opportunities to increase connection with their peers.

Finally, students with experiences of trauma may demonstrate difficulties with cognitive regulation and attention (Jimenez et al., 2016). Challenges with cognitive regulation may mean that students require differentiated instruction and increased support following multi-step directions or processes. In addition, students may require remediated instruction in reading and math, because difficulties in regulation across all domains of functioning (i.e., socioemotional, behavioral, cognitive) are negatively associated with reading and mathematics achievement for students who have experienced traumatic events (Panlilio et al., 2018; Schatz et al., 2008; Schelble et al., 2010; Schultz et al., 2009). Overall, the negative effects of poor self-regulation on academic achievement may require teachers to develop specialized instruction or provide increased relational support to help children succeed in school. However, increased responsibilities beyond curricular demands may inundate teachers’ resources in the classroom, leading to burnout or fatigue.

## Teacher Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Addressing student challenges associated with self-regulation and academic achievement increases the demands on teachers, as they must navigate balancing an understanding of trauma with holding students accountable for their behaviors. In addition, since students with histories of trauma require more adult support than the average child due to their difficulties with self-regulation and academic achievement, teachers who work with such students may experience increased stress (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014). This increased support takes a considerable amount of time, expertise, and energy, which, even with appropriate knowledge and training, can lead to the depletion of teachers' physical, psychological, and reflective teaching resources. Depletion of such resources in teachers has been linked to feelings of burnout (Bermejo-Toro et al., 2015) and compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995).

Burnout, a consequence of ongoing job-related stress, includes feelings of emotional exhaustion, which may lead to increased cynicism or depersonalization and a lessened sense of professional competence (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). For teachers, ongoing feelings of burnout are associated with adverse physiological and psychological outcomes (e.g., pain, depression), a lessened sense of overall well-being, increased absenteeism, and negative student outcomes (Brunsting et al., 2014; Steinhardt et al., 2011). Feelings of burnout are common among teachers (Iancu et al., 2018; Hozo et al., 2015), and teachers who work with students with histories of trauma may be at further risk of emotional stress, a main factor of burnout and attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Compassion fatigue, a particular type of burnout, is a global term used to describe the significant physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that caregivers who work with traumatized individuals experience over time (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue symptoms include psychological issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), desensitization toward

students and their needs, diminished quality of student-level care (e.g., instruction, support), and changes in empathy and compassion shown toward others (Figley, 1995). Although more prevalent and well-documented in other helping professions, such as nursing (Hinderer et al., 2014), mental health care (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017), and social work (Cocker & Joss, 2016), one study suggested that teachers are at an increased risk for compassion fatigue (Hoffman et al., 2007). Teachers may be at particular risk of experiencing compassion fatigue due to significant increases in the number of young students with histories of trauma, especially in at-risk populations (i.e., racially and economically segregated communities, homeless youth; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2008).

## The Cycle of Teacher Burnout and Compassion Fatigue, Teacher–Student Relationships, and Student Self-Regulation and Academic Achievement

Meaningful teacher–student relationships can positively shift students' trajectories and increase their learning, adjustment, and relationships with peers, as well as decrease challenging behaviors (Rudasill et al., 2010; Quin, 2017). Evidence suggests that authentic, caring student–teacher relationships that are individualized and attuned to emotional states positively impact the health and well-being of students who have experienced trauma (Dods, 2013). Furthermore, research notes that teachers' increased relational capacity for students is one necessary component of implementing a trauma-informed approach leading to positive outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2019; Wall, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019). This is consistent with Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) framework, which proposes that both teachers' and students' respective levels of socioemotional competence (i.e., awareness and management of one's own and others' emotions and interpersonal interactions) bidirectionally affect teacher–student relationships. That is, teachers with greater socioemotional competence and feelings of well-

**Self-Care**

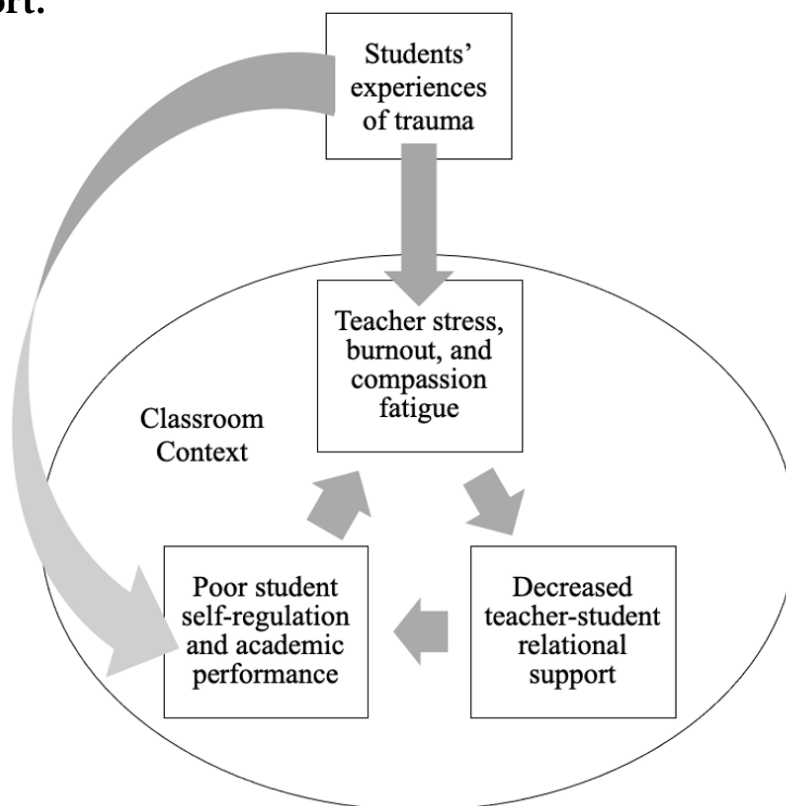
being are better able to engage in positive teacher–student relationships, which increases students’ own socioemotional functioning. In addition, students’ increased socioemotional competence strengthens teacher–student relationships and serves to promote teachers’ sense of efficacy and well-being.

Although the bidirectional relationship between student and teacher socioemotional competence can have a positive effect on teacher–student relationships, when teachers’ and students’ feelings of well-being and socioemotional competence are compromised, as in the case of student-level trauma, the bidirectional effect can become negative (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, NCTSN, 2008). The effects of burnout and compassion fatigue may diminish teachers’ socioemotional competence and abilities to proactively and compassionately respond to challenging situations within the school environment (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Thus, when students who have experienced trauma present additional stressors (e.g., poor self-regulation

and academic performance), teachers may be less equipped to provide appropriate supports or resources they require, which can exacerbate negative student responses to trauma (see Figure 1).

Following a domino effect, teachers who experience some burnout or compassion fatigue in response to child-level trauma are limited in both the amount and quality of support they can offer to their students (Madigan & Kim, 2021). In the absence of adequate support, students may lack the appropriate skills and strategies necessary to regulate their emotions and behaviors, which are likely already challenging to manage as a result of the original trauma (Quin, 2017; Rosen et al., 2018). Poor regulation among children may then continue to perpetuate responses of stress among teachers in the students’ immediate environment, fueling a vicious and contagious cycle of trauma, stress, and inadequate support. Ultimately this can limit children’s future success. However, self-care may be able to mitigate the negative effects of this cycle by decreasing teacher stress responses.

**Figure 1. Cycle of Student Trauma, Teacher Stress, and Inadequate Teacher–Student Relational Support.**



## The Importance of Self-Care

For teachers who work with students with histories of trauma, it is important to consider self-care strategies and practices that combat the negative outcomes of stress, burnout, compassion fatigue because these teachers may be more susceptible to experience such responses (NCTSN, 2008). In addition to facilitating positive teacher outcomes, teacher self-care may serve as a protective factor for students. Teachers who are able to reduce the negative outcomes of stress via self-care may be better able to offer support to students to bolster various areas of functioning and learning (Tugade et al., 2004). However, failure to practice self-care may perpetuate negative symptoms associated with stress and may further exacerbate negative symptomology in students, which may ultimately create more teacher stress.

We argue that the practice of self-care is not only beneficial for supporting teacher well-being but also is essential to buffering negative effects in the cycle seen in Figure 1 by reducing teachers' stress response. Moreover, it is important for teacher self-care to be a major focus of professional development in education. Research conducted with individuals from other helping professions showed improved symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue when self-care was prioritized (e.g., Hevezi, 2016; Thompson et al., 2014). Therefore, maintained self-care can provide a way for teachers to address their feelings of burnout and compassion fatigue. It is important that teachers learn appropriate strategies for self-care via professional development to ensure their own well-being, as well as their students' well-being.

## Self-Care Domains for Teachers

*Self-care* can be conceptualized as “activities individuals undertake in promoting their own health, preventing their own disease, limiting their own illness, and restoring their own health” (Levin & Idler, 1983, p. 181). In other words, self-care is taking care of oneself to live in balance. Simply put, teachers must foster the time, attention, and practice it takes to care for themselves in order to have the resilience to effectively teach and care for students. Although teacher preparation programs and school district professional development opportunities provide teachers with evidence-based instructional practices, as well as innovative ways to address a wide range of student needs, there is a continuing lack of emphasis on the importance of stress management, emotion regulation and coping strategies, self-efficacy, and self-care for teachers (Fives et al., 2007; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Moreover, unlike other caring professions (e.g., social work, psychology) in which awareness of negative effects of practitioner mental and physical health on clients is highlighted within a code of ethics (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2018), the importance of teacher well-being is seldom emphasized in education.

Physical, psychological, interpersonal, and reflective self-care approaches for teachers can cultivate greater well-being and positive teacher–student relationships (see Table 1 for an overview), which can in turn positively influence students' self-regulation and academic achievement. Physical self-care includes enriching the body through exercise, nutritious food, proper hydration, adequate sleep, and recuperation; these practices are important steps toward increased well-being. Even small changes in one's routine may have significant effects on heart health, immunity, cognition, and resilience to stress (Horswill & Janas, 2011; Mandolesi et al., 2018; Sheehan et al., 2019).

**Self-Care**

**Table 1. Overview of Self-Care Domains, Activities and Practices, and Supporting Research.**

<b>Self-Care Domain</b>	<b>Overview of Domain</b>	<b>Associated Activities and Practices</b>	<b>Supporting Research</b>
<b>Physical</b>	Activities and practices that support optimal physiological health and functioning.	Movement or exercise; adequate hydration; well-balanced diet; rest and repair (e.g., adequate sleep)	Physical self-care activities and practices are associated with greater cardiovascular health, immunity, attention, cognition, and overall well-being (Horswill & Janas, 2011; Mandolesi et al., 2018; Sheehan et al., 2019).
<b>Psychological</b>	Activities and practices that help strengthen psychological resources and overall resilience to stress and adversity.	Deep breathing; mindfulness and meditation; compassion practices (e.g., loving kindness); gratitude; cultivating positive emotions (e.g., joy, happiness, optimism)	Psychological self-care activities and practices are associated with greater resilience, connection with others, and overall well-being (Chong et al., 2011; Hevezi, 2016; Ma et al., 2017; Perciavalle et al., 2017).
<b>Interpersonal</b>	Activities and practices that build stronger, more positive relationships with others (e.g., students, parents, colleagues, community).	Deep (mindful) listening; active listening	Interpersonal self-care activities and practices are associated with greater compassion and overall well-being, as well as increased tolerance and the ability to take the perspective of another (Krasner et al., 2009; Moll et al., 2015; Omilion-Hodges & Swords, 2016).

<b>Self-Care Domain</b>	<b>Overview of Domain</b>	<b>Associated Activities and Practices</b>	<b>Supporting Research</b>
<b>Reflective</b>	Reflective self-care is most commonly connected with the development of self-regulated/self-directed teaching. Reflective self-care can also employ the skills of monitoring, assessing, and evaluating individual teacher self-care practices for the purpose of increase self-care behaviors/practices.	Using agenda book, calendar, journal, apps or other tools to monitor self-care practices (i.e., water intake, exercise, mindfulness); reviewing the data to inform personal self-care goals; explicitly (through writing, dialogue, or reflective thought) connecting self-care practices to impacts on teaching behaviors and student interactions	The result of employing such skills can lead to improved self-regulated practice, wellness, modeling for students, and sustained, positive student interactions (Black & William, 2009; Capa-Aydin et al., 2009; Chatzistamatiou et al., 2014; Meusen-Beekman et al., 2015).

Psychological self-care includes activities and strategies that help strengthen mental resources and foster resilience, a way to “bounce back” or adapt in the face of stress, trauma, or adversity. Greater psychological resilience is associated with lower stress, greater coping abilities, increases in immune system functioning, and overall improved well-being (Tugade et al., 2004). Although there are many avenues to foster greater psychological self-care, research indicates that diaphragmatic breathing, contemplative practices (e.g., mindfulness, yoga), compassion or gratitude practices, and cultivating positive emotions (e.g., happiness, optimism) may have significant effects on one’s overall well-being (Chong et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2017; Perciavalle et al., 2017). More specifically, mindfulness is theorized to safeguard from feelings of burnout in the long term by targeting day-to-day physical and emotional health; the practice of mindfulness may be accomplished by fostering greater present moment attention as well as increasing one’s self-awareness, emotion regulation, and compassion for oneself and others. These prosocial skills allow for a more robust, proactive coping process (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2012).

Interpersonal self-care via cultivating positive relationships with students, parents, colleagues, other service providers, administrators, and community members may also increase well-being. In fact, positive social support is associated with greater self-reported physical health and decreased stress, regardless of income and geographic region (Kumar et al., 2012). Further, interpersonal self-care and activities, such as mindful (deep) listening, are associated with an increased ability for perspective taking, tolerance, compassion, and sense of well-being (Krasner et al., 2009; Moll et al., 2015; Omilion-Hodges & Swords, 2016). Evidence from a study on professional chaplains found that supervisory and family social support was negatively related to feelings of burnout (Galek et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for teachers to cultivate positive relationships both in and out of the classroom.

Another important aspect of self-care and general well-being is to employ reflective skills and strategies that foster balance at work. Teachers’ ability to reflect on their practice lays a foundation, or pathway, for reflective self-care. Self-reflection leads to a self-



regulated teaching practice, which can be defined as the process of setting, planning, enacting, monitoring, and adjusting goals in teaching for the purpose of improving student and teacher learning (Butler et al., 2013). In doing so, teachers are able to reflect on their experiences with a child who has experienced trauma, evaluate the interaction, and drive development and learning via proximal processes within the school context.

## Supporting Teachers' Self-Care Through Professional Development, Interventions, Mentoring, Preparation, and Partnerships

Although teachers are increasingly more knowledgeable of effective trauma-informed classroom practices, to date, minimal attention has been placed on cultivating greater teacher well-being and preparing future educators for the realities of the classroom environment. Supporting students with histories of trauma may have profound effects on educators as it relates to their feelings of burnout and compassion fatigue (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential for educators to foster not only a greater understanding of effective trauma-informed classroom practices but also increased awareness of the distal effects of student-level trauma on their own well-being (Loomis & Felt, 2020). Such awareness, understanding, and support may occur through different avenues including in-service professional development opportunities, teacher-level interventions, mentorships for early-career teachers, pre-service teacher training, and partnerships with community mental health professionals.

In-service professional development opportunities may be important avenues for school systems to explore to address the effect of student-level trauma on educators. However, often these trainings are brief and school systems may opt to incorporate more intensive teacher-level interventions to address areas of challenge and necessary support. For example,

Mind-Body Group for Teacher Stress (MBGTS) is an intervention that is specifically designed for teachers to decrease stress, increase skills in self-care and coping, and address trauma-related stress among students (Eyal et al., 2019). Other evidence-based professional development programs, such as Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Educators (CARE for Teachers; Jennings, 2016), Stress-Management and Relaxation Techniques in Education (SMART in Education; Roeser et al., 2013), and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Santorelli et al., 2017), may also be considered as avenues to address more generalized feelings of stress and burnout among education professionals. Most notably, stakeholders may need to collaborate with policymakers to establish these types of educator self-care programs and initiatives at the district and state levels.

Another option to increase teacher self-care and well-being is mentorships for early-career teachers, which are associated with a greater sense of commitment to the teaching profession, more effective instructional practices, and higher student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). More specifically, early-career teachers who were part of informal or formal mentorships with other education professionals noted a greater sense of well-being, efficacy, and resilience (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Squires, 2019). Although a majority of schools offer early-career teachers mentorship opportunities, application and effectiveness of such partnerships remain inadequate in many circumstances (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Thus, implementing effective strategies and programs to increase teacher resiliency to the stressors of the classroom continues to hold great importance moving forward.

School systems and teacher-preparation colleges may also wish to implement preparation coursework and pre-service teacher training dedicated to topics surrounding effective stress management, emotion regulation, and social-emotional competence, as this is often lacking in pre-service teachers' education (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Evidence indicates that feelings of stress and burnout may

manifest well before teachers step foot into their own classrooms (Fives et al., 2007). Given the emotional nature of the classroom (Keller et al., 2014), further cultivation of relational skills, stress management, emotion regulation, and coping skills during teacher preparation may lead to greater resilience to the stressors of the classroom.

Finally, evidence suggests that self-care may not be appropriate to address all types of teacher stress (Bober & Regehr, 2005), and teachers may require additional professional mental health counseling or therapy. A key part of self-care is the awareness of when professional care may be necessary. Thus, school systems may consider partnering with mental health professionals in their community to provide workshops, consultation, or coaching services.

Regardless of the direction a school system may take, it remains essential to surround teachers with critical resources and professionals to support their growing resilience through self-care practices. To more fully understanding the effects of student-level trauma on teacher stress and overall well-being, a needs assessment may help stakeholders to identify areas for growth and can tailor support for teachers accordingly. Teachers are a key to the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral function of their students. For teachers who work with students with histories of trauma, their role becomes all the more significant. Therefore, it would be wise for important stakeholders to take the desirable steps to ensure the physiological and psychological needs of their teachers are met. In the end, by meeting the needs of teachers, one can be assured the needs of students are more effectively addressed.



## Conclusion

Self-care is critical to teachers' well-being and resilience to stressors experienced in the classroom. More notably, to respond to challenging situations in the school setting, particularly in the case of student-level trauma, it is critical for teachers to develop and maintain self-care practices. Often, teachers are recognized as being the number one influence on student learning; however, it is important to remember that the reverse also holds true. Students are a major influence on teacher practice, as their actions and responses shape teachers' actions and responses. The negative cycle of trauma, teacher

burnout and compassion fatigue, and inadequate relational support can be buffered via teacher self-care, which combats teacher stress responses. Self-care supports provide simple, yet powerful, actions teachers can do for their own good and for the well-being of their students. However, teachers cannot be expected to engage in self-care in the absence of systematic support. In-service professional development opportunities, teacher-level interventions, mentorships for early-career teachers, pre-service teacher training, and partnerships with community mental health professionals provide options for stakeholders to provide support to teachers in this endeavor.

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