

# Self-care for Educators & Caregivers During a Pandemic

March 31, 2020

**Marieke van Woerkom**

12 tips to help you take care of yourself in the coming weeks and months.

<https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/self-care-educators-caregivers-during-pandemic>

With schools closed for the foreseeable future to slow the spread of the coronavirus, educators are being called on to adapt and adjust their practice, sometimes with minimal support from their districts. So principals and teachers are experimenting. In creative and ingenious ways, they are looking to maintain their relationships with students, while creating remote learning communities for and with their students.

Educators are doing all this while juggling home environments that may not be optimal for teaching, or learning for that matter—and while coping with their own stress and hardships during this pandemic.

Meanwhile, many parents and other caregivers have turned into teachers during this period of sheltering at home, and are themselves struggling to create home environments, structures, and schedules that enable remote education and home-schooling. They too are experimenting and inventing new ways of being with their children, in coordination with their children's teachers, while juggling work schedules and other adult responsibilities.

**Self-care at a time like this is key.** We can't be available for our children if we don't have the energy or bandwidth ourselves, worse still if we get sick. For this reason we've pulled together our resources at Morningside Center for you to have at your fingertips: 12 ways to best take care of yourself in the coming weeks and months.

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**1. Pay attention to how you're feeling.** Check in and recognize what's going on for you. Whatever you're experiencing, whether anxiety, sadness, worry, or fear, remember it's okay not to be okay. This is a normal response to the abnormal stress-inducing reality created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than trying to make yourself and others "feel better," it's often more helpful to tune in and actually experience your feelings—uncomfortable though that might be. Pushing feelings down and ignoring them doesn't serve anyone, least of all you. It may help to let go of the notion that when you're feeling pain, sadness, or fear of any kind, you're weak. Recognize feelings, instead, as a natural part of being human. Try to be present with your feelings. And if people sincerely ask how you are, let them know how you're feeling, for real. It could open up a new connection that can support you through these difficult times. See also Point 12, which describes "the Listening Exchange," a format to share how you're feeling with others, because as the saying goes, "shared grief is halved grief."

**2. Limit your news intake.** It's understandable that you want to stay informed, but consuming news all day long, especially at times like these, tends to increase stress and anxiety levels. Do stay abreast by tuning in to reputable news sources at set times, but don't get caught up in the endless devastating news cycle, especially not right before bed. For accurate, updated information, add the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) to your news feeds. And remember that your thoughts produce your feelings and that those thoughts can be shaped by an overexposure to negative media stories. So be intentional about the information you consume. As Mr. Rogers said: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" Paying attention to this kind of news may help you produce a different set of feelings.

**3. Be kind and forgiving with yourself and others.** Though continued high expectations, no matter the setting, are important for the sake of our children, we also need to recognize that we do not necessarily have the tools or supports needed to move into this new space of remote learning without glitches and delays. So remember to be gentle and kind with yourself. Forgive yourself when things aren't going the way you'd hoped or planned. Do-overs are part of learning for us as well as our students. Look at this time as an opportunity to model what do-overs look like—with grace, if you can! This is a great time to all be learners together, making mistakes and being patient with one another as we all adapt, adjust, and make mistakes.

**4. Practice kindness, generosity and compassion with others.** These might be trying times for people living in close quarters with others. Try to see the best in others and the situation you find yourself in. Practice kindness, compassion, and generosity with others as best you can, while having realistic expectations of who they are and what they're capable of. And if you live by yourself, practice that same kindness, compassion, and generosity with yourself. Consciously choose to see the best in yourself and others.

**5. Remember to breathe.** Throughout it all, remember to breathe. Simple though it may sound, breathing deeply from your stomach is not something that comes naturally to many of us. Natural, deep breathing involves the large muscle in your abdomen known as the diaphragm. It causes your stomach to expand on the in-breath and fall on the out-breath. Try it by placing your hand on your stomach as you slow down and deepen your breath. By breathing this way from your stomach, you signal your nervous system to calm down, which can help to combat your stress and anxiety.

**6. Focus on gratitude.** Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with lower levels anxiety, stress, and depression. First thing in the morning (or at any point in the day), think of some things you're grateful for. It

could be anything, large or small, like feeling gratitude for waking up in a warm bed, having hot water for your morning shower, or having a good cup of coffee to start your day. You might feel gratitude for your family, supportive colleagues, your children, or your health. Whatever it is, direct your mind to go there. Then check into how it makes you feel. Take a few minutes to sit with that feeling before moving on to the rest of your day. And actually practicing gratitude can brighten our day: Take a minute to reach out to the people in your life you are grateful for—spread some joy during these dark times.

**7. Keep a journal.** Some people prefer to keep a gratitude journal, or use journaling in general to help them slow down, daily. Morningside Center Senior Program Manager Daniel Coles shares a variation on journaling called [morning pages](#), a free-write journaling practice for right after you wake up. It is about committing to paper (yes this is about old fashioned long hand!) whatever it is that crosses your mind first thing in the morning. This can help us clarify for ourselves what is happening and how we are feeling, and can sometimes lead to helpful problem-solving.

**8. Maintain a regular contemplative practice.** There is a range of meditative and contemplative practices that you may already be using to be more intentionally present, in the moment, full of curiosity, and without judgment. These are important to keep us grounded and connected. Research shows that a regular mindful practice can trigger hormones that relieve stress and anxiety, while improving our mood, self-awareness, mental concentration and emotional self-regulation. They can also help us regulate psychological and emotional swings. A few minutes of mindful breathing or practices such as yoga or tai chi, several times a week, can make a noticeable difference. Below, you'll find some resources Morningside Center staff have shared around contemplative practices.

**9. Move and exercise daily.** As much research has established, staying active helps us to stay fit not only physically, but mentally. It can help lift our mood, improve our cholesterol, lower our blood pressure, improve the quality of our sleep at night and manage our stress—all useful in combating the challenges both of loneliness and living on top of each other in small apartments (or larger living spaces for that matter). So build some movement into your daily schedule, with or without your children, indoors, in the yard, or in uncrowded outdoor spaces that you have access to. Below, you'll find some resources Morningside Center staff have shared to help us stay active.

**10. Seek out nature, fresh air, and sunlight.** Studies indicate that it's good for us to spend time in nature. Being in nature lowers stress, combats depression, and promotes positivity. It is good self-care practice to spend time in the outdoors. Of course, this is easier for some of us than others, depending on where we live. But whether you're able to go for a hike in nature, head into the yard, or simply open your windows and hear the birds that seem more prevalent now that some typical city sounds from cars, horns, and planes have eased up, seek out your own slice of nature. And if you're looking for things to do with kids, you might want to do some planting, in the yard or on your windowsill.

**11. Nourish your body and soul.** While cooped up at home, remember to eat as healthily as you can. If cooking is something you enjoy, consider cooking as a contemplative practice—fully present and with intentionality, you can chop, sauté, stir, taste, season, cook, bake, etc. It's a great way to slow down. And if you do not have that association with food or its preparation, think about what does bring a smile to your face. Is it music, poetry, scented baths, hot showers, petting a dog or cat, listening to birds outside your window, online gatherings with friends or family, virtual dance parties? Then build that into your daily schedule. And remember, as always: drink lots of water.

**12. Distance yes, but only physically.** Connection is a core human need, so reach out to friends, family, and neighbors through text, social media, phone calls, online gaming, video chats, virtual happy hours, and dance parties. Also, turn to trusted friends and family members to process your fears, concerns, and anxiety. Consider the process called “the listening exchange.” In this process, two people who might be life partners, close friends, or trusted colleagues, take turns listening mindfully to each other for equal amounts of time. What’s shared in the listening exchange is confidential. After a listening exchange, people often comment about how wonderful, and rare, it is for someone to give them their full attention without interrupting, even for five minutes.