It's time for teachers to look after their mental health – here's how

To ensure students’ wellbeing, teachers need to feel confident about their own - so here are some mood-boosting tips

Playing a sport can help you feel more connected to others, improve your health, and lift your mood. Photograph: Stephen Pond/FA/Getty Images

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During the safety briefing on every plane journey adults are reminded that, in case of an emergency, they are to secure their own oxygen masks before they help their children fit theirs. Why? Because it helps you look after children more effectively. The same is true of mental health, and it is something teachers should consider. After all, it is difficult to discuss good mental wellbeing in front of class if we, as adults, do not practise it ourselves.

Action to improve the mental health of teachers is certainly needed: worries about teacher workload has seen 67% of teachers state that their job had adversely impacted their mental or
physical health, according to a recent NASUWT survey. This has led to suggestions that half a billion pounds should be transferred to schools to help them tackle the issue.

Which is why it’s worthwhile for teachers to look at these simple ways, informed by the latest NHS guidelines, to boost their mental health.

### Connect
Researchers have shown the importance of having a range of healthy relationships. They suggest feeling disconnected from others is as bad for you as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The Mental Health Foundation states that “people who are more socially connected to family, friends and their communities are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems”.

As well as forming connections on an individual level, evidence suggests that being part of a group has similar benefits. People who identify closely with a group reported being happier.

### Be aware
We live in an age of distraction. Research suggests that we check our phones on average 85 times a day. This, among other distractions limits how much we notice what is going on around us. When world famous violinist Joshua Bell busked at a train station during rush-hour in Washington, of the 1,097 people who passed him, only seven stopped to listen. Just a few days before, people had paid hundreds of pounds to hear him play the same music.

While looking to the future can be motivating (that’s why psychologists encourage people to set goals) thoughts about the past or future can become too dominant, and sometimes it is important to focus on the present moment. Practising this skill will reduce stress levels, improve your ability to handle future stressful situations, and help you develop better relationships.

### Keep learning
Why does learning increase your mental wellbeing? As well as giving a sense of achievement, being enjoyable, and helping you cope with stressful events, a study into adult learning (pdf) has found that “the most fundamental and pervasive benefit from learning of every kind is a growth in self-confidence”.

Learning does not have to mean formal education. It can be anything that develops your knowledge in any area. Stepping out of your comfort zone and trying something new will enhance this. The feeling of achievement new skills can give you can help your emotional wellbeing and will be motivating.

### Be active
As well as known physical benefits, exercise can help improve your mood, self-esteem and ability to deal with stress. The World Health Organisation suggests that adults, on average, should do about 22 minutes of physical activity per day.

It’s easy to be put off when perceived barriers such as feeling too tired get in the way of exercise. However, physical activity can actually help combat fatigue and doesn’t have to be organised sport (eg gym classes or walking). Furthermore, being active can encourage better mental health, especially if it helps with socialising or focusing on the present.

### Give to others
https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/jun/05/teachers-five-ways-to-boost-mental-health-mindfulness
Most people have heard the phrase “It is better to give than receive”. And economics research suggests that we feel a “warm glow” when we help someone else. Fans of sitcom Friends will be familiar with this concept from the scene where Phoebe and Joey debate selfless good deeds.

The power of giving is supported by psychological research (pdf) that found that random acts of kindness result in the giver feeling the benefit as well as the receiver. This is an interesting area for those who work in schools where, by definition, most of the job involves giving either of time, energy or advice. But giving does not have to involve money or be time-consuming. Small, almost incidental random acts of kindness can be powerful enough.

**A final thought**

When it comes to mental health, some people don’t know where to begin. These five areas offer a starting point. Connecting with others, learning, giving, being physically active and improving awareness offer tangible strategies even for the most busy of lifestyles. Encouraging everyone to look after their mental health makes sense for schools, including teachers.

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