

Self-care strategies for teachers



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Teaching is a rewarding yet demanding profession that places significant emotional, mental, and physical demands on educators. To effectively support and nurture the wellbeing of their students, teachers must also prioritise their own wellbeing. Recognising the early warning signs of stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma, particularly when supporting students who have experienced trauma, is the first step towards maintaining personal wellbeing. From there, teachers can reflect on and adopt practical strategies that promote resilience, sustain their wellbeing, and enable them to continue supporting their students with confidence and compassion.

Signs of stress and burnout

Personal

- Sad
- Anxious
- Irritable
- Loss of interest or pleasure
- Low energy
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased consumption of alcohol

At work

- Procrastination
- Difficulty concentrating and meeting deadlines
- Lower-than-normal work standards

- Less social (or withdrawn in interactions with colleagues, families, children and young people)
- Low job satisfaction
- Negative and not solutions focused
- Cynical or critical attitudes at work (Black Dog Institute, 2025)

Possible actions you can take to support your own wellbeing

The following is a list of strategies that teachers can implement to care for their own wellbeing:

Personal strategies

- Schedule time for enjoyable activities
- Regularly connect with friends and family (Black Dog Institute, 2025)
- Practising faith-based activities such as prayer, worship, etc (Gallup, 2023).

Workplace strategies

- Be realistic about your workload
- Work collaboratively with colleagues
- Celebrate successes with colleagues and school leaders
- Help cultivate a workplace that is mentally healthy by showing kindness and gratitude, offer to support to a colleague, but remember that you aren't a counsellor.

- Discuss your role and workload with your school leaders
 - Discuss any work-related issues with school leaders
- (Black Dog Institute, 2025)

Vicarious trauma

Unfortunately, when there is ongoing exposure to hearing others' traumatic experiences, it is common to develop vicarious trauma. According to the Vicarious Trauma Institute (cited by (Matejko, 2022) Vicarious trauma can be defined as *indirect exposure to trauma through a first-hand account or narrative of a traumatic event*.

Vicarious trauma may also be referred to as secondary trauma compassion fatigue. In serious cases, it can lead to other mental health conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. Symptoms may include:

- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Unexplained irritability, anger or numbness
- Inability to focus
- Unable to sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Inability to focus
- Blaming yourself or others
- Feeling hopeless, isolated or guilty about not doing enough
- Difficulties concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Persistently worrying about students outside of work hours or even while sleeping

(Lander, 2018).

Appendix 1 is a useful survey published by the Centre for Victims of Torture (2019) for individuals to evaluate the degree to which vicarious trauma impacts an individual, such as a teacher, working in a helping profession.

Create a culture of awareness

School leaders have an important role in acknowledging that teachers' work is difficult and too often teachers feel alone and unsupported. (Lander, 2018). For teachers experiencing vicarious trauma, this can accentuate feelings of being overwhelmed and isolated. School leaders who publicly and privately acknowledge that teaching is difficult, can help teachers feel supported (Lander, 2018).

Create Peer groups at work

Peer support networks are known to help reduce the impact of vicarious trauma on individuals working in helping professions. Lander (2018) suggests that schools could adopt this strategy, providing a regular, scheduled time for groups of teachers to meet and share their experiences and strategies for managing vicarious trauma.

Trauma-informed schools

Schools that adopt a trauma-informed response in their daily interactions with students create a culture that is supportive and caring and provide ongoing training for teachers on

supporting children who have experienced trauma. This training and school culture also help teachers recognise vicarious trauma in themselves and enable them to use these strategies to support themselves (Lander, 2018).

For you to consider

1. Consider your strengths as an educator – what strengths do you have to enable you to do your job well?
2. What aspects of your role cause you stress? What strategies can you put in place to manage this stress?
3. How is your physical health? What is one action you can adopt today, this week or this month to improve your physical wellbeing?
4. How is your mental health? What is one action you can adopt to support your mental health wellbeing?

5. What activities give you pleasure and make you happy? How can you incorporate more of these activities into your life?

6. Where are your 'safe spaces' and people? How can you add more of these to your life?

7. Do you need additional support? Where can you go to access it?

8. What is something you have done recently that you are proud of?

9. What is something you are grateful for?

10. Do you have any habits that you would like to change? What could you do differently that would improve your wellbeing?

Relationships Australia. (n.d.).

**Pro
QOL**
Professional Quality of Life

Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue

Select the number that honestly reflects how frequently you experienced these things in the last 30 days.

1=Never	2=Rarely	3=Sometimes	4=Often	5=Very Often
_____	1.	I am happy.		
_____	2.	I am preoccupied with more than one person I [help].		
_____	3.	I get satisfaction from being able to [help] people.		
_____	4.	I feel connected to others.		
_____	5.	I jump or am startled by unexpected sounds.		
_____	6.	I feel invigorated after working with those I [help].		
_____	7.	I find it difficult to separate my personal life from my life as a [helper].		
_____	8.	I am not as productive at work because I am losing sleep over traumatic experiences of a person I [help].		
_____	9.	I think that I might have been affected by the traumatic stress of those I [help].		
_____	10.	I feel trapped by my job as a [helper].		
_____	11.	Because of my [helping], I have felt "on edge" about various things.		
_____	12.	I like my work as a [helper].		
_____	13.	I feel depressed because of the traumatic experiences of the people I [help].		
_____	14.	I feel as though I am experiencing the trauma of someone I have [helped].		
_____	15.	I have beliefs that sustain me.		
_____	16.	I am pleased with how I am able to keep up with [helping] techniques and protocols.		
_____	17.	I am the person I always wanted to be.		
_____	18.	My work makes me feel satisfied.		
_____	19.	I feel worn out because of my work as a [helper].		
_____	20.	I have happy thoughts and feelings about those I [help] and how I could help them.		
_____	21.	I feel overwhelmed because my case [work] load seems endless.		
_____	22.	I believe I can make a difference through my work.		
_____	23.	I avoid certain activities or situations because they remind me of frightening experiences of the people I [help].		
_____	24.	I am proud of what I can do to [help].		
_____	25.	As a result of my [helping], I have intrusive, frightening thoughts.		
_____	26.	I feel "bogged down" by the system.		
_____	27.	I have thoughts that I am a "success" as a [helper].		
_____	28.	I can't recall important parts of my work with trauma victims.		
_____	29.	I am a very caring person.		
_____	30.	I am happy that I chose to do this work.		

Ownership of the ProQOL measures transferred to the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) in 2016.



YOUR SCORES ON THE PROQOL

Based on your responses, place your personal scores below. If you have any concerns, you should discuss them with a physical or mental health care professional.

Compassion Satisfaction _____

Compassion satisfaction is about the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well. For example, you may feel like it is a pleasure to help others through your work. You may feel positively about your colleagues or your ability to contribute to the work setting or even the greater good of society. Higher scores on this scale represent a greater satisfaction related to your ability to be an effective caregiver in your job.

If you are in the higher range, you probably derive a good deal of professional satisfaction from your position. If your scores are below 23, you may either find problems with your job, or there may be some other reason—for example, you might derive your satisfaction from activities other than your job. (Alpha scale reliability 0.88)

Burnout _____

Most people have an intuitive idea of what burnout is. From the research perspective, burnout is one of the elements of Compassion Fatigue (CF). It is associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively. These negative feelings usually have a gradual onset. They can reflect the feeling that your efforts make no difference, or they can be associated with a very high workload or a non-supportive work environment. Higher scores on this scale mean that you are at higher risk for burnout.

If your score is below 23, this probably reflects positive feelings about your ability to be effective in your work. If you score above 41, you may wish to think about what at work makes you feel like you are not effective in your position. Your score may reflect your mood; perhaps you were having a “bad day” or are in need of some time off. If the high score persists or if it is reflective of other worries, it may be a cause for concern. (Alpha scale reliability 0.75)

Secondary Traumatic Stress _____

The second component of Compassion Fatigue (CF) is secondary traumatic stress (STS). It is about your work related, secondary exposure to extremely or traumatically stressful events. Developing problems due to exposure to other's trauma is somewhat rare but does happen to many people who care for those who have experienced extremely or traumatically stressful events. For example, you may repeatedly hear stories about the traumatic things that happen to other people, commonly called Vicarious Traumatization. If your work puts you directly in the path of danger, for example, field work in a war or area of civil violence, this is not secondary exposure; your exposure is primary. However, if you are exposed to others' traumatic events as a result of your work, for example, as a therapist or an emergency worker, this is secondary exposure. The symptoms of STS are usually rapid in onset and associated with a particular event. They may include being afraid, having difficulty sleeping, having images of the upsetting event pop into your mind, or avoiding things that remind you of the event.

If your score is above 41, you may want to take some time to think about what at work may be frightening to you or if there is some other reason for the elevated score. While higher scores do not mean that you do have a problem, they are an indication that you may want to examine how you feel about your work and your work environment. You may wish to discuss this with your supervisor, a colleague, or a health care professional. (Alpha scale reliability 0.81)

Beth Hudnall Stamm (2009). Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Version 5 (ProQOL). www.ProQOL.org.

This measure may be freely copied as long as (i) the author is credited, (ii) no changes are made, and (iii) that it is not sold. If changes are made beyond substituting more specific terms for [help] or [helper], please refer to the measure as adapted. Visit ProQOL.org for the most current version.

Ownership of the ProQOL measures transferred to the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) in 2016.

WHAT IS MY SCORE AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In this section, you will score your test so you understand the interpretation for you. To find your score on **each section**, total the questions listed on the left and then find your score in the table on the right of the section.

Compassion Satisfaction Scale

Copy your rating on each of these questions on to this table and add them up. When you have added them up, you can find your score on the table to the right.

3. _____
6. _____
12. _____
16. _____
18. _____
20. _____
22. _____
24. _____
27. _____
30. _____

Total: _____

Sum of Compassion Satisfaction questions	Compassion Satisfaction level
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

Burnout Scale

On the Burnout scale, you will need to take an extra step. Starred items are "reverse scored," meaning you should write in your rating, and then refer to the table below for how to score that question. For example, if you responded a 4 to question 1 "I am happy", that would be converted to a 2 for scoring. Then, sum your scores and find your score on the table to the right.

- *1. _____ = _____
*4. _____ = _____
8. _____
10. _____
*15. _____ = _____
*17. _____ = _____
19. _____
21. _____
26. _____
*29. _____ = _____

Total: _____

Sum of Burnout Questions	Burnout level
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

Your rating	For scoring, change to
1	5
2	4
3	3
4	2
5	1

Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale

Like for Compassion Satisfaction, copy your rating on each of these questions on to this table and add them up. When you have added them up, you can find your score on the table to the right.

2. _____
5. _____
7. _____
9. _____
11. _____
13. _____
14. _____
23. _____
25. _____
28. _____

Total: _____

Sum of Secondary Traumatic Stress questions	Secondary Traumatic Stress level
22 or less	Low
Between 23 and 41	Moderate
42 or more	High

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