Teachers, Take Care of Your Mental Health

This week, my brain gave me a subtle reminder. A reminder about the importance of taking care of my mental health.

To be the best possible teacher, we need to prioritize our own mental health as well.

Once again, the week was stressful. Any teacher can attest to, that it can get very bad when holidays are approaching.

It is no secret that many teachers frequently burn out and suffer from stress.

The mental health of teachers deserves more attention.

Common Stressors in Schools That Affect Mental Health

There are many factors that put teachers under significant stress.

One is the lack of resources. Often, teachers need to buy basic supplies at their own expense.

Or they need to beg the economy department for weeks. This is not unique to public schools either. Even private schools have poor leadership sometimes.

This is a significant stressor in the daily day because it can mean the difference between a good or a subpar lesson.

Then there is the issue of overwork. Most teachers need to accomplish far more than what is realistic to reach in a workday.

I have not met any teachers, who have never taken work home. I think many people do not realize how much work goes into preparing a quality lesson. Some of the lessons you find on this blog take me at least 1 to 2 hours per lesson to prepare for the website. Even though the major work has been done beforehand.

Another stressor is the workload associated with administrative tasks. Most of these tasks, like making reports or grading actually do not have time allocated. And of course, authorities and stakeholders continue changing rules and regulations. This means even more work.

In my last teaching job, I used at least 30% of the time on administrative tasks.

Conclicts And Microagressions

Teaching is a job, where you interact with people. People do not always act rationally. It is common for conflicts to occur in classrooms.

These conflicts can be among students. Like bullying.

Or there is a potential for conflicts between teachers and students. Because there will always be a natural power dynamic in the relation.

My job is to help the student develop their full potential. Sometimes I need to push the student out of his comfort zone. And this is always a potential for conflict.

And sometimes these conflicts can turn physical. As teachers, we are always in the center of it.

If you work with special needs students as I did, this potential increases tenfold. Many of my students had very poor skills in regulating their emotions. It was never their fault. they just didn’t get the chance to learn.

But for most teachers, hardly a day passes by where they have not been in some sort of conflict situation.

Our Mental Health is Also Our Own Responsibilty

We can blame the government. We can blame poor leadership. And we can be rightfully pissed at our underfunded schools.

But we also need to look inwards.

The only way to change our situation is by prioritizing our own mental health.

Most teachers don’t and I am no exception. Most of us choose this profession because we are driven by idealism and humanist values.

This is also the case for healthcare workers, by the way, a professional field where the statistics show equally high rates of stress-related illnesses and burn-outs.

But in this quest to serve others we can not forget ourselves.

Many times have felt guilty about going to a café or restaurant instead of writing reports about students.

When the choice is between me and the students, guess who usually comes first.

This has consequences. We risk putting our mental health and well-being on the line.

We Need To Take Care Of Ourselves To Take Care Of Others

To be a good teacher, I need to bring a surplus to my students. But if I do not take care of myself, there is no surplus to give.

Back in 2013 for instance, I got a Deep Vein Thrombosis. In my brain. I had a stroke at the ripe age of 30.

This happened after a prolonged period of school work and moonlighting at a care home.

Back then, I didn’t learn my lesson.

Things Will Not Get Better, If We Accept Them

We need to ask ourselves what we are doing why we are doing it.

Stress is not only a consequence of having too much work.
Doing things that are not in line with our values also creates stress.

Poor management decisions, arbitrary demands from authorities, and many other reasons can also undermine our values. Like having to buy basic supplies like pencils with your own money. It just is not right.

Often we tend to gloss over those issues for the sake of our students.

But guess what. Poor leadership in our education systems will not improve unless the flaws are visible to everyone.

If we all the time “solve” the issue by spending extra energy, time, or even money, how will it become obvious that something needs to change?

By doing so we give an excuse to leaders and politicians to avoid their responsibility and the true gaps in our organizations may never be uncovered.

If there are not enough teachers, there are not enough teachers. Period. The solution is not letting ourselves burn out, but hiring more teachers.

And if the demands at work are not possible to fulfill it needs to be pointed out.

We can not go on hiding it by teachers losing their sleep over solving the matter.

Teachers are fleeing our schools faster than ever before. Perhaps it is exactly what is needed.

Our Mental Health Must Come First

We need to prioritize our mental health and wellbeing much higher.

I have tried to make big efforts in recent months towards asserting myself more and taking care of myself.

I have become better at saying no to some tasks and the crazy part is that it started to have a positive effect on my work and my students as well.

Asserting and prioritizing myself has meant that I have much more surplus every time I go into the classroom. My students can feel that.

And by not accepting everything, also our leaders will be forced to step up and find other solutions.