

Developing a Union Led Peer Support Network: A System of Support for Leaders and Members

2026 Good Teaching Conference

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Equity & Justice Department

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<https://shorturl.at/JDThj>



How are You Feeling Today?



Grounding Activity

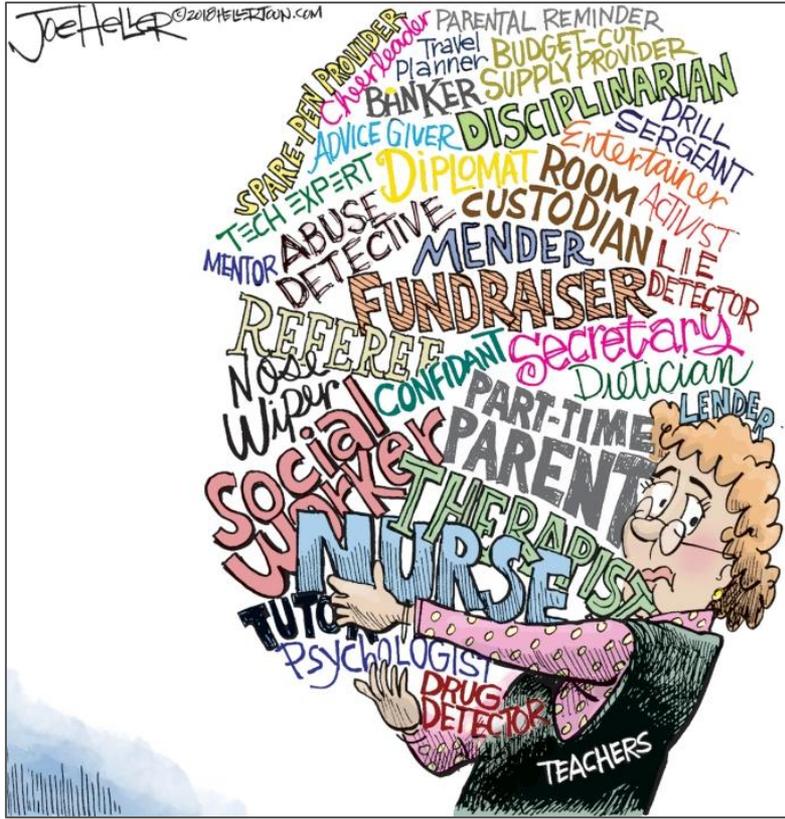
- Sit upright with your feet planted firmly on the floor.
- Close your eyes or fix your gaze on a specific item in the room.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Clear your mind so that you are present in this space.
- Mentally list 3-5 things in your life that bring you joy.



Intentions for Today

- I will have compassion for my colleagues and myself as we all learn to cope with high levels of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue.
- I will use my voice to speak up about working conditions impacting our members and develop a support system in my local to support the well-being of our members and students in a trauma-informed way.
- I will use the resources available to help mitigate stress for myself and my members.





It's a hard time to be an educator.

Working Conditions

Truths

Data From Recent Surveys

What We Know

- Schools have been underfunded for years.
- There are attempts to dismantle and defund public education.
- There are attacks on free speech and educational autonomy in the classroom.
- Educators are scapegoated and blamed for the shortcomings in the educational system by parents and political entities.
- Staffing shortages add undue stress for all educators.

A Survey of TK-12 Educators in 2026

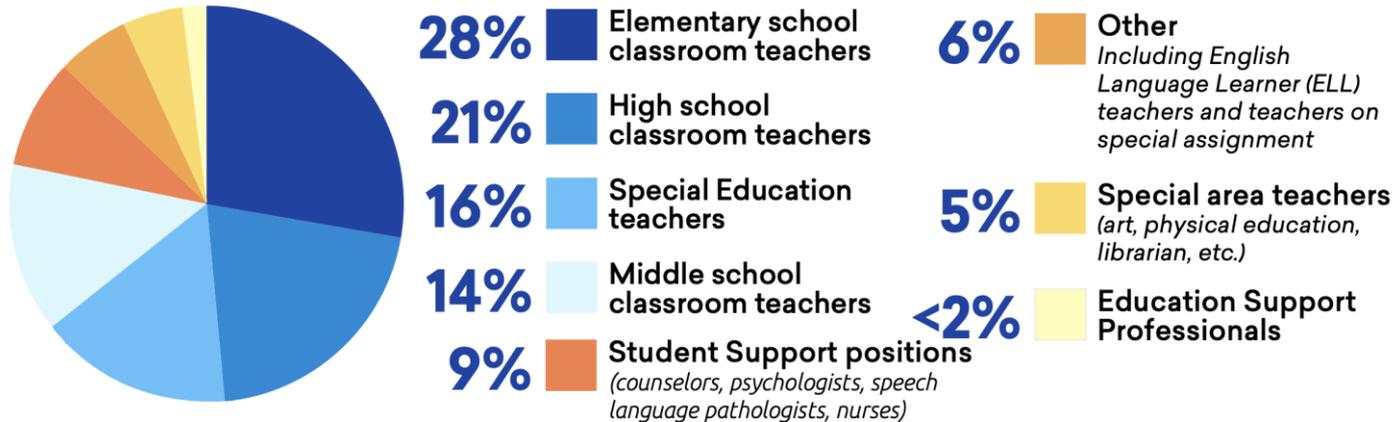
CTA surveyed certificated and classified members to understand what it takes to weather economic uncertainty in their classrooms and careers.

[Study Link](#)



Methodology

2,015 active certificated and classified CTA members in TK-12 schools filled out the survey via email between December 2nd and 9th, 2025. Of the members surveyed:



School Setting

Suburban 55%

Urban 30%

Rural 12%

The Underfunding of Schools

Educators cite the following as serious issues in California schools:

- 88% - lack of adequate resources to meet students' needs
- 88% - low pay for educators
- 78% - overcrowded classrooms



Attacks on Educators

Educators cite the following as serious issues for their classrooms:

- Book bans
- Lack of free speech
- Restrictions on teaching about race, justice, equity, and LGBTQ+ issues



Staffing Shortages

Educators cite the following as critical staffing issues:

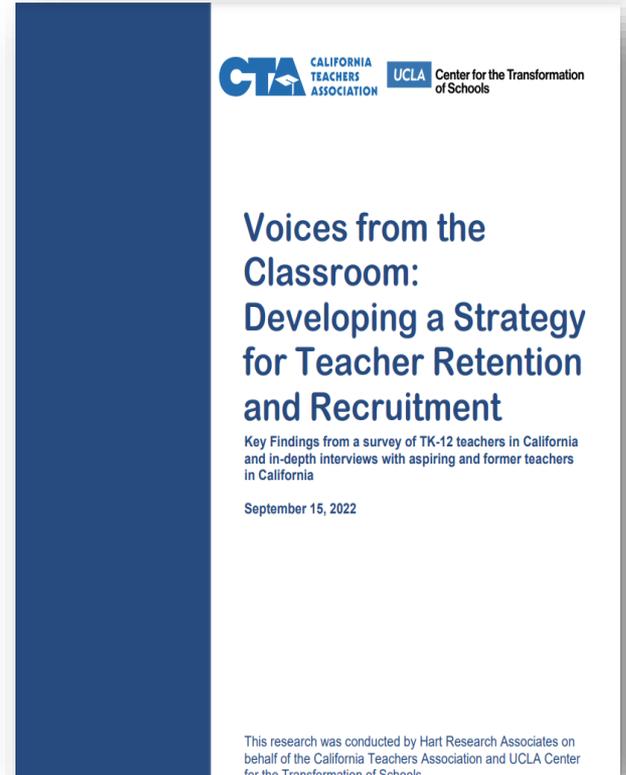
- 73% - a serious educator shortage at their school site
- 84% - insufficient staff and training support for special education students
- 68% - student access to mental health support



Data from the Hart Research in 2022

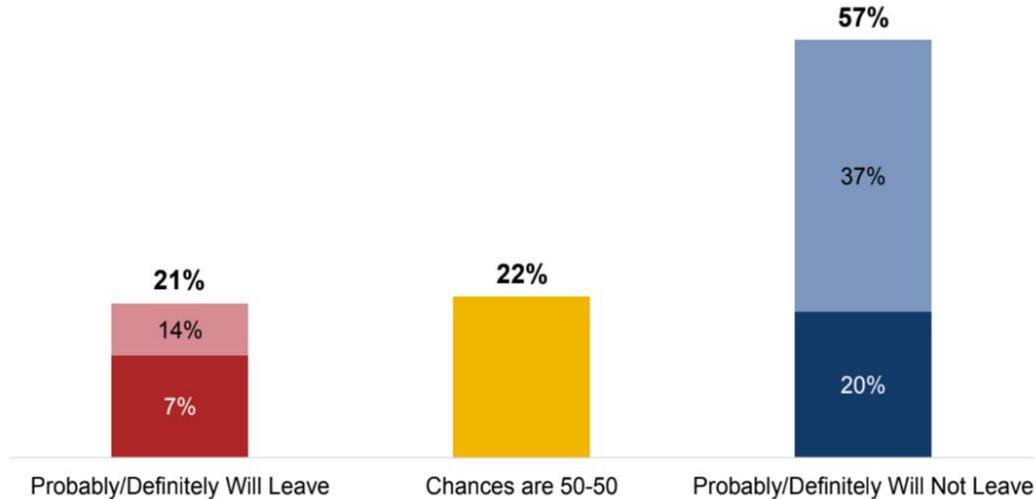
Survey conducted by the Hart Research Associates on behalf of CTA and the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools.

[CTA/UCLA Hart Research Study Study Link](#)



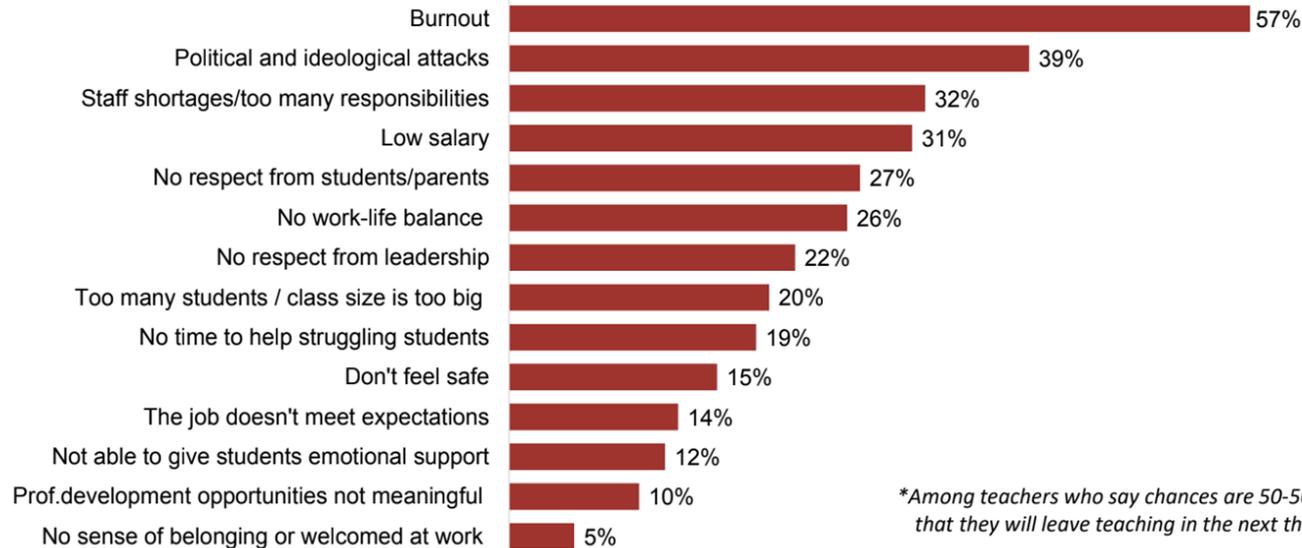
One in five teachers expect to leave the profession within the next three years.

Realistically speaking, what are the chances you will leave the teaching profession within the next three years?



Burnout is the top reason teachers might leave but political/ideological attacks are also a top factor for many.

*Top three reasons why teachers are considering leaving the profession.**

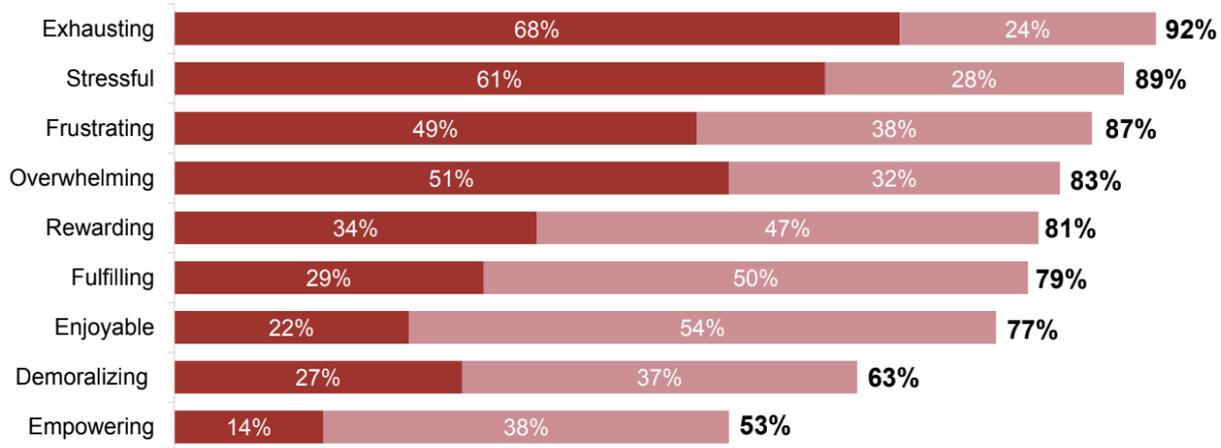


**Among teachers who say chances are 50-50 or greater that they will leave teaching in the next three years.*

Teachers express a range of emotions regarding their position, but exhaustion and stress are the most commonly felt.

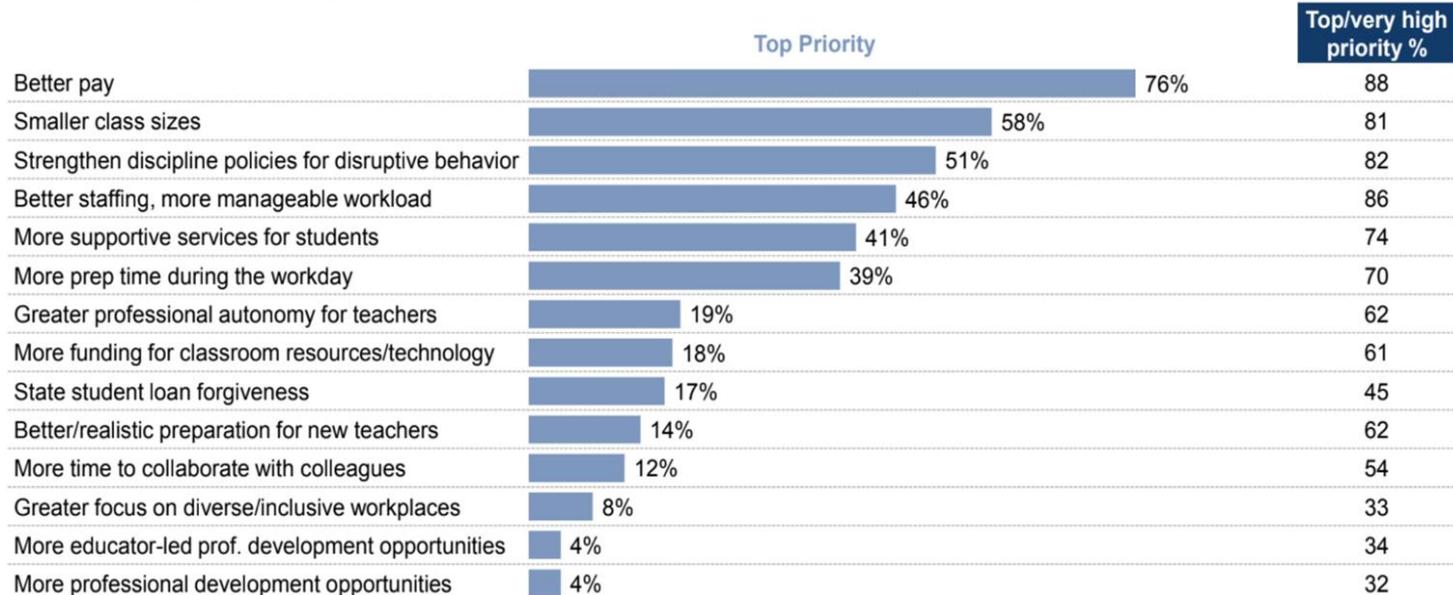
% describes the work of teachers.

■ Very well ■ Somewhat well



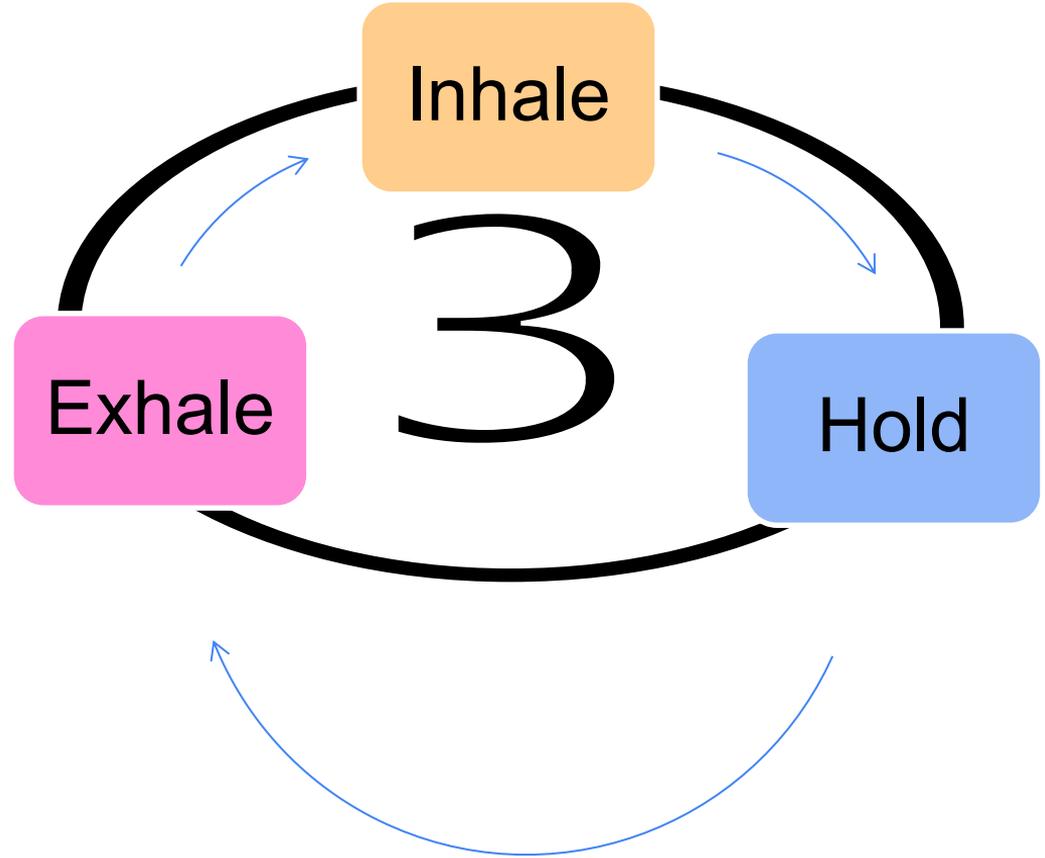
Better pay, smaller class sizes, and enhanced discipline are the top changes teachers say would improve retention.

Top four changes that state and local officials should prioritize in order to improve teacher retention.



BOX BREATH

- Triggers the relaxation response
- Restores your body into “rest and digest”
- Practice any time you’re stressed out or anxious



Stress Management

Seeking to Understand

Taking Care of Yourself First in Order to Help Others

Putting Our Oxygen Mask on First

- In case of an emergency, the airlines stress that passengers put on their masks first before they assist others.
- Likewise, local associations need to put their oxygen masks on first to help support the mental well-being of its members.



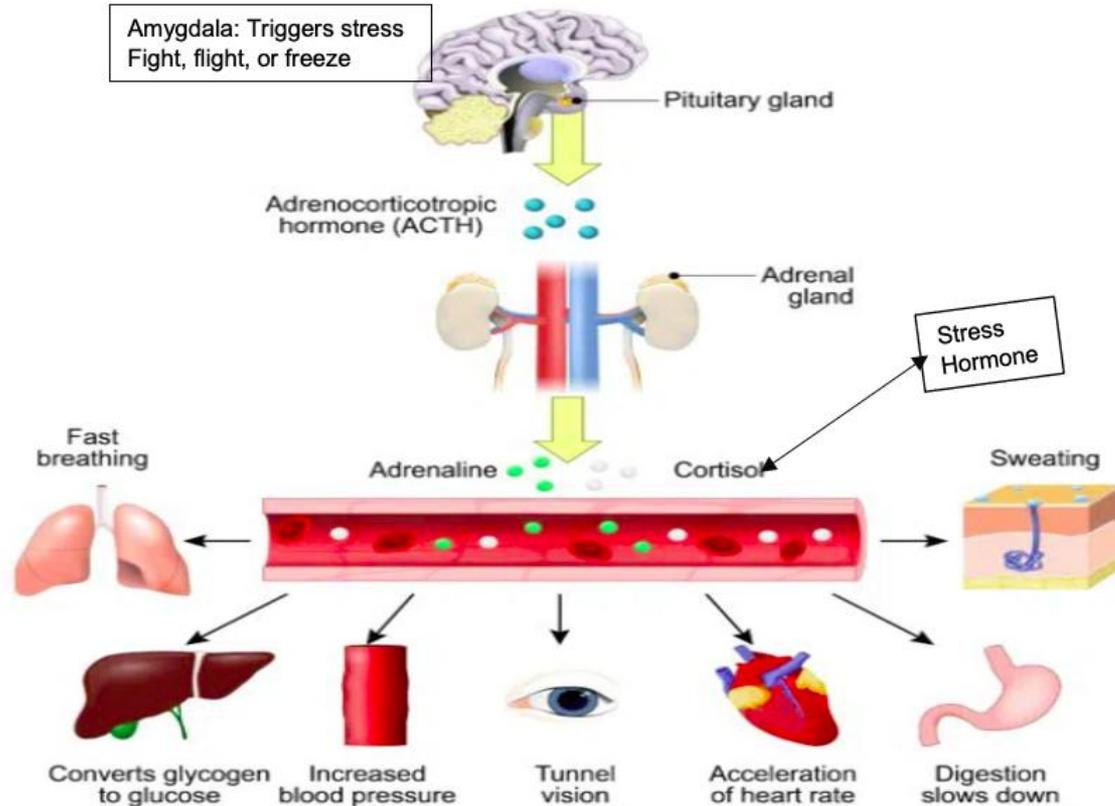
What is stress?

- The most common definition of stress is, “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension”.
- Another definition of stress is, “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize”.

Source: The American Institute of Stress: www.stress.org



Stress Response



Types of Stress

- Compassion Fatigue
- Burnout
- Chronic Stress



Source: [The American Institute of Stress](#), [Transitional Support](#), and [Yale Medicine](#)

Handout 6: ABCs of Addressing Compassion Fatigue

Directions. This activity has two parts. In the [Part 1](#) you will engage in a self-assessment to determine how well you engage in the ABCs (Awareness, Balance, and Connection) of mitigating compassion fatigue. In the [second part](#), you will identify one strategy focused to help you build awareness, balance and connection.

This document was adapted from Saakvitne, K. & Pearlman, L. (1996). *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization for Helping Professionals who Work with Traumatized Clients*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company. Retrieved from (<https://4.files.edl.io/0d8f/06/25/18/182950-e99322a0-a293-4bab-9821-c2522b697049.pdf>)

Part 1.

Take the Self-Assessment. Determine whether or not you engage in the following approaches for Awareness, Balance and Connection

Awareness

Approach	Description	You Do This (Y or N)
Know your own "trauma map."	Acknowledge your own history of trauma and be aware that it can affect how you view and do this work.	
Inventory your current lifestyle choices and make necessary changes.	Do you get enough sleep? Do you allow yourself downtime? Do you exercise regularly? Try to do these things.	
Take care of yourself.	Create a self-care list and post it prominently in your home or office. A sample self-care list may encourage you to: Be creative, get outside and appreciate the weather; enjoy other environments; have fun; and socialize with people	

ABCs of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others — often through experiences of stress or trauma. Compassion fatigue is often mistaken for burnout.

Signs of Compassion Fatigue

- Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness
- Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by work demands
- Feeling detached, numb and emotionally disconnected
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Increased anxiety, sadness, anger and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Physical symptoms - headaches, nausea, upset stomach and dizziness
- Increased conflict in personal relationships
- Withdrawal and self-isolation
- An increase in substance use as a form of self-medication



Burnout Exercises



Burned-In Teacher Podcast

Burnout

Burnout is a state of chronic stress that leads to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.

- **Exhaustion:** Feeling physically and emotionally depleted
- **Isolation:** People with burnout tend to feel overwhelmed.
- **Escape fantasies:** Dissatisfied with the never-ending demands of their jobs, people with burnout may fantasize about running away or going on a solo-vacation
- **Irritability:** Burnout can cause people to lose their cool with friends, co-workers, and family members more easily.
- **Frequent illnesses:** Burnout, like other long-term stress, can lower your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds, the flu, and insomnia

Chronic Stress

What is Chronic Stress?

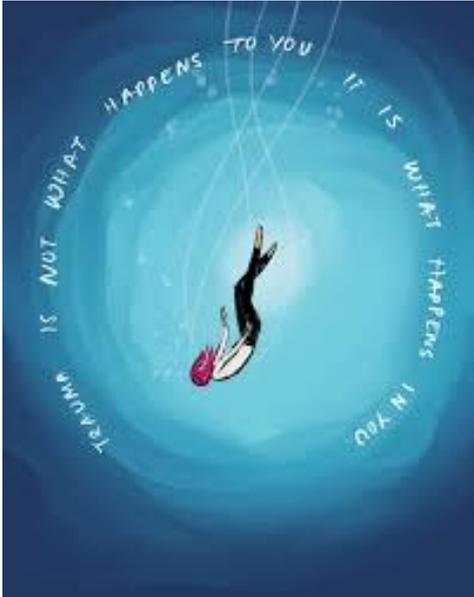
Chronic stress is a consistent sense of feeling pressured and overwhelmed over a long period of time.



Impacts of Chronic Stress on Performance

- Attention
- Memory
- Emotional self-regulation
- Decision making
- Teamwork
- Relationships
- Social skills
- Learning & professional growth

What is Trauma?



1. Trauma is the emotional, psychological and physiological residue left over from heightened stress that accompanies experiences of threat, violence, and life-changing events.
2. Trauma typically has a significant and lasting effect on cognitive development, social-emotional development, and overall learning.

Sources: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

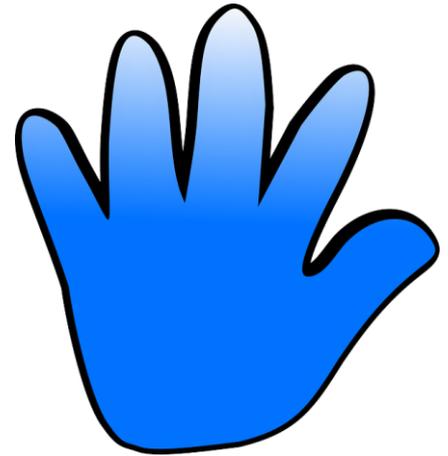
How Might Trauma be Present Among Members and in the Classroom?

Fight	Flight	Freeze
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acting out• Behaving aggressively• Acting silly• Exhibiting defiance• Being hyperactive• Arguing• Screaming/yelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawing• Fleeing the classroom• Skipping class• Daydreaming• Seeming to sleep• Avoiding others• Hiding or wandering• Becoming disengaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exhibiting numbness• Unwilling to participate• Unable to get needs met• Giving a blank look• Feeling unable to move or act

Five Finger Breathing

The Five Finger Breathing technique is a stress reducer. Try it with your faculty. Have fun with it!

- Raise your hand like you are going to high 5.
- Spread you fingers like a starfish.
- Starting with the palm of the hand near the thumb, slowly inhale to the top of the fingertip. Then exhale down the inside of the finger.
- Repeat on each finger until you have gone through all the fingers.



What is Self Care?

- Any activity that we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health.
- Is not something that we force ourselves to do or don't enjoy doing.
- Something that refuels us, rather than take from us.
- Means being patient with and kind to yourself.
- Giving yourself permission to take care of you first.



Areas of Self Care

- Mental (Intellectual)
- Physical
- Emotional
- Social
- Spiritual
- Professional
- Financial
- Environmental



Union-Led Peer Support Network

Being an Advocate

We need to support the educators and faculty members who are struggling if local unions are going to survive and be healthy

Union-Led Peer Support

- The local association is a first responder when a member needs assistance or support in job related issues.
- The local is usually a first responder during times of crisis such as an active shooter, pandemic, wildfires, earthquakes, storms, and other natural disasters.
- The local is usually a first responder when a member is experiencing stress related issues due to working conditions.



Starting a Peer Support Network

The goals of a Peer Support Network

- To help members who are experiencing challenges in a supportive and non-judgmental setting.
- To provide an intentionally structured, formalized peer support model that is initiated by the union for its members.
- To train members to become peer support providers.

Components of a Peer Support Network

- One-to-one peer support such as using negotiated health benefits or referrals to other support agencies
- Self-help support groups such as a Community of Practice where members provide mutual support and information without the involvement of administrators
- Community resource referral
- Advocacy services
- Dedicated space to provide online information and resources on the union website
- Mindfulness practices

Outcomes of a Union-Led Peer Support Network

Research shows that peer support networks can:

- Humanize mental health challenges and take them outside the realm of administrative intervention
- Reduce feelings of isolation and alienation
- Help people gain control over their symptoms and reduce administrative action
- Foster hope and re-engagement in the community, workplace and the union
- Help people learn coping skills and improve resilience
- Promote a better understanding of mental health issues and services
- Help members reach life and career goals and improve quality of life
- Provide rewards for the union through the experience of listening to and helping others

The Role Of A Peer Support Provider

- A peer support provider does not take the place of a clinician or primary care provider, nor is it his/her goal to “fix” a member.
- A peer support provider should be:
 - Empathetic, respectful, and non-judgmental
 - Skilled at communicating and active listening to encourage openness and honesty
 - Capable of critical thinking to assist the member to discuss concerns, determine the peer’s true needs, and detect when a peer is nearing or in crisis
 - Keen to learn and build peer support skills
 - Committed to confidentiality (within legal limits)

Where Does a Local Begin?

- Put your unions's oxygen mask on first
- Start with your leadership
 - Officers and Board members
 - Rep Council members
 - Committee chairs
 - Office staff
- Introduce self care techniques and strategies
 - Reminder - Self care is any activity that we do to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health



Where Does a Local Begin?

- Determine what supports are in place
 - Counseling
 - Peer support groups
 - Resources
 - Childcare issues addressed
 - Employee Assistance Program
- Contract language
 - Additional mental health days or PN days
 - Sick Leave Bank
 - No reprisal for mental health needs
 - Confidentiality
- Partner with a community organization



Create a Sense of Community in the Union

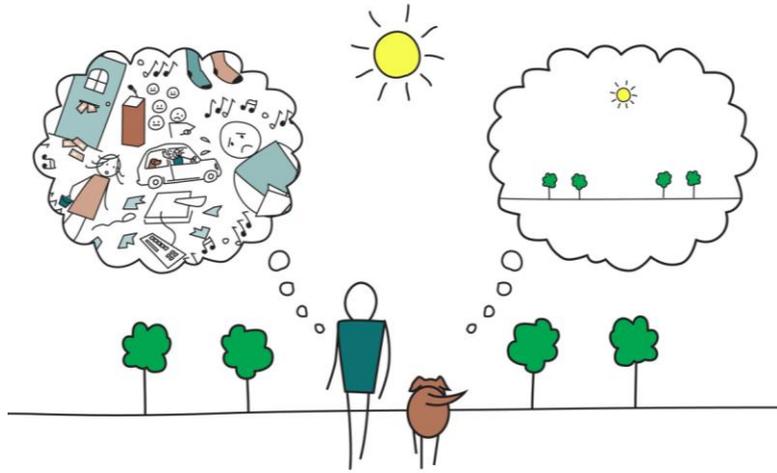
- Strategies for community building in the union
 - Community of Practice to share best practices for stress management or other topics
 - Mental health Mondays (virtual or in person)
 - Talk Tuesdays to discuss different non-work-related topics (recruit members to help facilitate)
 - Lunch and Learn for professional development
 - Walks scheduled at a designated place and time
- Develop a culture of appreciation
- Send a colleague a thank you or appreciation note
- Create spaces to find and explore common values



Tips/ Tools

Supporting One's Well-Being
I'm Allowed to Do What's Best For Me

Mindfulness



Mind Full, or Mindful?

Being in the present moment with awareness and curiosity, non-judgmentally; being fully self-aware

Mindfulness Strategies

- Deep breathing
- Coloring
- Connect with nature
- Mindfulness 5-4-3-2-1 (5 things you can hear, 4 things you can see, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste)
- Recite positive affirmations
- Guided meditations
- Listen to music
- Sit and do nothing
- Practice self-compassion (speak kind words out loud to yourself)

Make Time to Rest

- Rest isn't a reward, it's an essential part of your physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing.
- Rest is a key ingredient for success, health, and happiness.
- Resting helps you feel renewed.
- Let go of the expectation that you always need to be doing something.
- Work at building rest into your daily/weekly schedule.



Help and Resources

CTA Resources

Financial Self-Care

<https://www.cta.org/for-educators/member-benefits>

Wellness Center

<https://www.cta.org/for-educators/wellness-center>

NEA Resources

[Articles & Resources](#)

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Receive help with problems and issues related to:

- Counseling
- Child/Eldercare
- Financial
- Parenting
- Legal Assistance
- Substance Abuse
- Grief and Loss
- Stress

Should you seek professional help?

Don't hesitate to seek professional help

We care about our hearts, so why can't we care for our minds?

- Use your health plan
- Some districts have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Consult with your clergy to find spiritual relief
- Check community agencies for a free or reduced cost referral



Organizations

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

- Website: www.casel.org
- School guide for SEL:
https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/2021.6.15_School-Guide-Essentials.pdf

Kaiser RISE Index (Resilience in School Environments)

- Website: <https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/>
- Empowers schools to create safe and supportive learning environments by cultivating practices that strengthen the social and emotional health of all school employees and students.
- Developed as part of Thriving Schools, RISE works with schools and districts to prepare school employees to better understand and integrate social and emotional well-being into all aspects of school life, both theirs, and their students.

Calm App

Free Calm Subscription The world's #1 app for mental health

Millions of people are experiencing lower stress, less anxiety, improved focus and more restful sleep with Calm. Whether you have 30 seconds or 30 minutes, Calm content is made to suit your schedule and needs.

To activate your subscription, click the link:

<https://www.ctamemberbenefits.org/calm>





On a post it, write your own
self-care quote, affirmation,
or reminder to take care of
yourself first

How are You Feeling Today?



With
Gratitude



Thank
You