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The benefits of social-emotional learning

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Stress Schools and Classrooms



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At the end of March when most schools moved to distance learning, researchers at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, **surveyed more than 5,000 U.S. teachers and asked them to list the most frequent emotions they felt each day. The top five responses were *anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed and sad.***

Anxiety was by far the most frequent response. “The uncertainty and unpredictability about what the future of school will be is taking a toll on their wellness,” says Yale researcher Marc Brackett, PhD, who conducted the survey with colleague Christina

Cipriano, PhD, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

In early May, the researchers sent the same survey questions to special education teachers. In addition to the anxiety and fear other teachers had mentioned a few weeks earlier, special educators shared that they felt exhausted, frustrated and confused. “The requirements for distance learning kept evolving, and they were having trouble keeping up with those expectations,” Cipriano says.

Despite the unknowns, research points toward ways to help educators cope—benefits that trickle down to students. For example, teachers are less likely to experience burnout, and more likely to report healthy functioning, when they have autonomy to plan lessons and make decisions, feel connected to peer networks, and have sufficient guidance and training, Cipriano says.

The research also suggests that teachers with better social emotional learning (SEL) skills are more likely to have good relationships with students, and those students in turn are more engaged in learning.

SEL works best when implemented systematically, providing students and faculty a common language and set of skills to draw from. “It’s about infusing these principles into the immune system of the school,” Brackett says.

That calls for administrators to seek out professional development trainings in SEL and set aside adequate time to invest in teacher health and well-being, Cipriano. “If schools have SEL programs already, they should lean into them,” she says. If they don’t, there’s a wealth of tools available to help them get started at [CASEL Cares \(https://casel.org/covid-resources/\)](https://casel.org/covid-resources/).

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