Occuptional Stressors (Part 2): Mitigating Occupational Stressors in Education

Understanding

Please see the brief entitled *Occupational Stressors (Part 1): Understanding Experiences of Occupational Stressors* for more information regarding the terms used in this brief.

Occupational requirements and risks impact all stakeholders differently depending on many variables and factors. That being said, it is important, particularly in the current context of elevated levels of leaves and attrition, to understand the potential impacts of those requirements, and how they can be mitigated systemically and individually.

Common Signs of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Vicarious Trauma

- Exhaustion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling discouraged
- Feeling hopeless
- Irritability
- Desire to leave the position
- Feeling cynical
- Feeling deeply upset
- Feeling out of control
- Feeling unsafe

Cause for Consideration

It is often the case that educators experiencing the occupational stressors associated with teaching are critiqued for not having engaged in self-care or that they have not taken care of themselves well enough. This view of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, comes from a place of misunderstanding that both misidentifies and labels the experiences of educators. Although there is no direct intervention that can eradicate stress from the profession, there are both systemic and individual commitments that mitigate the effects of occupational stress on teachers, for their wellbeing, and for the downstream benefits of the students they serve.

Systemically

- Primary prevention approaches: professional development opportunities and/or including trauma, burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious/secondary trauma in Bachelor of Education curricula to better understand the signs, symptoms, and interventions
- Developing a better understanding of the occupational risks and requirements and the impacts they have on teachers, and adjusting added programming and expectations accordingly
- Listening to educators' needs, thoughts, desires
- Enhancing opportunities for positive social support, and understanding its role as a protective factor as it decreases feelings of isolation.
- Attending not only to students' health and wellbeing, but also to the teachers, administrators, and professional school staff and shaping vision and mission statements attentive to composing healthy lives across the entire landscape
- Reducing trauma exposure through active decisions such as class composition, increased healthy social connectivity, more control over expectations, and scheduling
- Destigmatizing the accessing of professional supports
- Supporting self-care systemically, not as an individual responsibility

On an Individual Level

- Developing a strong network of support both in and out of school
- Understanding what is an optimal balance and working to attain it (this does not mean 50/50 work/home for everyone. Everyone's optimal balance is different)
- Being self-reflective and honest with one's self - not just pushing through
- Acknowledging the impacts of and pressures shaped by "good teacher" stories, and holding space for other stories
- Acknowledging that trauma lives in the body and the body will remember and remind, and attending to the body
- Seeing professional supports when and as needed
- Understanding that working with students and hearing about their trauma may be more difficult for educators who are living with unresolved traumas themselves, having a plan in place and reflecting on to what extent one can handle exposures to students' interpersonal trauma is necessary
- Self-understanding can ensure educators are self-regulated (can modulate their own emotional responses) and can offer predictable, safe, and appropriate responses

Understanding the Challenges and Opportunities of Alignment With Trauma-Sensitive Practice for Educators

People often use the term ‘self-care’ as a counterbalance to burnout and compassion fatigue. Unfortunately, this term has the dangerous effect of placing the responsibility solely on the individual in need of care, which can then feel like an added burden - *you aren’t self-caring well enough if you aren’t feeling better*. It also leads to some potentially dangerous and simplistic messaging such as: *do yoga* which may be experienced as an added burden for which an educator has no time. While these are good suggestions for some people they are not ‘blanket cures.’ Often it is the systemic factors, workplace culture, workload, and training as well as prosocial interactions that can support and sustain educators.

While the emotional care and wellbeing of students are often seen as the goal of implementing trauma-sensitive practices in schools, it is essential to recognize that organizational and systemic moves toward trauma-sensitivity for all can actively mitigate some of the occupational risks and requirements that can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma.