

# Leading yourself and others through tough times

To say life is demanding right now is a dramatic understatement. The challenges school leaders, teachers, students and parents have been facing since the pandemic began are complex and seemingly unrelenting. This of course is especially true for those operating in states enduring repeated and lengthy periods of lockdown.

Unfortunately, none of us has the power to control our circumstances. The simple truth is the only real power we have in life is to choose how we perceive the reality we are faced with and in turn respond. We can choose to rail against the truth or choose to focus on what is within our control and find ways to navigate ourselves through.

Reflect for a moment on how often you have observed people wasting energy and time feeling resentful about their circumstances, rather than working out what they can do about it. Have you yourself experienced the debilitating impact of wallowing in misery or allowing fear to consume your thinking?

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as being “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.

Reflecting on that definition it isn't difficult to see the size of the challenge for most people around the world right now. What we defined as ‘normal stresses of life’ only 18 months ago has changed in ways few of us could have imagined.

For a parent daily stress may have included the hustle inherent in getting kids ready for school and out the front door on time. Now many of these parents are being asked to supervise their kids school day while also maintaining focus on their work demands.

For teachers a typically stressful day may have included balancing the demands of classroom time with lesson planning. Now they are juggling home schooling their own children, with learning new technologies and striving to achieve high standards of learning outcomes for their students.

And of course, the pressure on school administrators is just as intense as many deal with worried parents who are struggling to pay school fees, resetting budgets, rescheduling events and so the list goes on.

The first step toward coping is accepting that life is complex and demanding a lot more from us than what was considered ‘normal’ not so long ago. Recognise that there is only so much any of us can do with the finite resources we have which includes time and energy.

We need to maintain empathy for one another and be kind to ourselves also. Don't expect too much of yourself, your colleagues or your loved ones. Of course, we all need to keep striving to do the best job we can do, but let's also adopt a flexible, supportive and tolerant attitude that will help everyone to feel a little more confident that it really doesn't matter if we fail to get everything right.

Our psychological and emotional wellbeing is a constantly shifting thing. We all live each day somewhere on a continuum between optimal mental health, represented by feeling good and functioning well, and mental health issues represented by adverse changes in the thoughts and emotions that dominate.



Take each day as it comes while being disciplined about looking after yourself. The formula for maintaining wellbeing isn't particularly complex but sticking to the routines that help can be challenging.

Eating regularly and a balanced diet, fitting in exercise to your busy schedule and getting enough quality sleep are mission critical priorities. So too is engaging in activities that energise your spirit. Staying connected with the people you love, spending time laughing or simply enjoying your favourite hobby can go a long way to helping you to maintain the depth of energy reserves you need to keep getting through each challenging day.

Make balance a non-negotiable priority. Set and maintain boundaries that ensure you are not overworking and constantly running on empty. Time to rest and recover are essential to maintaining focus and having the resilience to keep going.

It may be necessary for you or other people around you to learn how to say "no". Avoid the common trap of taking on everything that is asked of you.

Once you have established healthy self-care routines, you will be in a position to lead other people through these times. If you lead a team or are looking for ways to guide friends or family members through the challenges they face, understand that your advice and guidance is most powerfully expressed through leading by example.

Demonstrate that you believe in the ability to successfully navigate through the difficulties you face. Work with people to identify opportunities and formulate strategies to respond to challenges that arise.

Celebrate wins. Look for big and small wins along the way. While there may be a lot going wrong, and many more mountains to climb, regularly stop and focus people's attention on what is going well. Positive feedback, arguments won, obstacles removed – look for every opportunity to pat yourselves on the back.

Prioritise strong relationships. While your team may be under extreme pressure don't allow standards of respectable conduct to drop. Tolerating aggressive, rude or dismissive behaviour at work or home is only likely to drain the spirit of your team or family and undermine collective success.



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