

Teacher Wellness Practice #5: Dealing with Constant Change

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Classroom Community, Wellness

The pandemic has thrust our world into a state of radical uncertainty. Every day brings new challenges, directives, forecasts. In the past week alone, what unexpected things happened in your life?

Here are some things I've heard from fellow educators:

"I found out over the weekend that my kids' teachers have been posting all these assignments on Seesaw and Canvas. I hadn't noticed that! I'd been making sure my kids were studying two hours a day. Now I'm pivoting: meeting with them every weekday morning to go over all the listed assignments and put together a longer school day. I feel bad for being behind the curve on this. While I want to step up and honor the teachers' efforts, it's added yet another demand on my time."

"My 81-year-old mom fell and broke her hip. Of course, it was traumatic news. But I didn't expect the wave of anxiety and sadness as I realized she'd have to navigate this entire situation alone, without any of her four children by her side. The surgery was done without us there, and the rehab will be too."

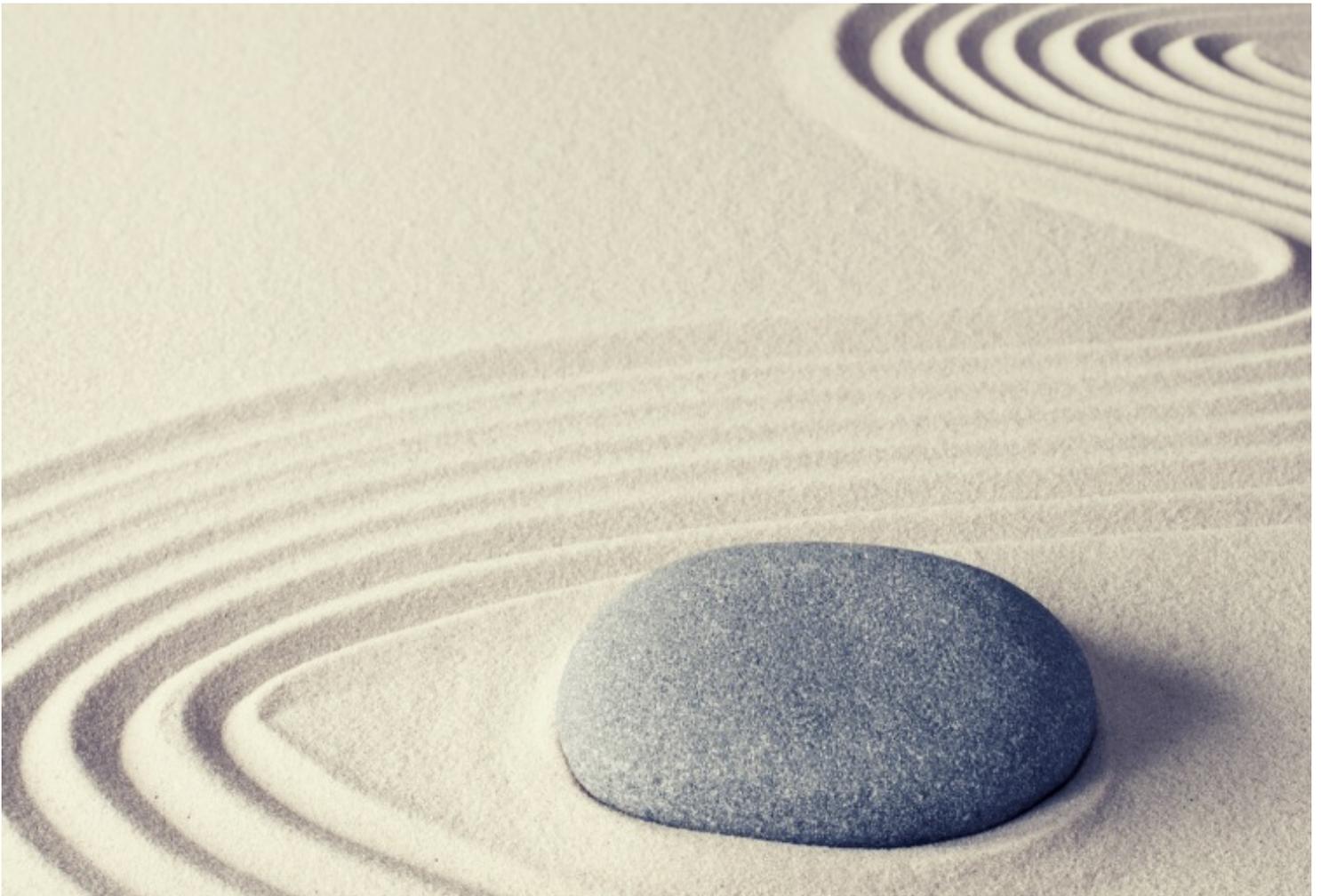
"Our school is closed till at least the fall. I'm so worried about my students – all students, actually! – falling behind, at a time in their lives when they need to be learning so much. I feel so helpless and just plain awful about it."

Just to make things even more challenging, we're often facing new difficulties in multiple domains at once. We learn that a friend has contracted the virus, our kid has a meltdown from feeling cooped up, and the internet goes out, making it impossible to post student packets. What's next?

More change. More navigation *sans* map.

How are you coping with all this uncertainty?

Maybe there are moments when you feel ready to face whatever's next, and times you lie awake worrying. Maybe some days you can laugh at a cartoon or video that captures some aspect of our bizarre reality, or treasure increased quality time with a pet or child, or savor the temporary lack of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), knowing there's not much to miss out on these days: everyone's home, just like you. Maybe you feel like you're snapping or cracking or melting into a puddle from the demands life is placing on you.



We cope better and worse over time ... and the changes keep coming at us. Yet even with all this uncertainty, we can be sure of certain facts.

One fact: Change is a fundamental aspect of life. This truth can be masked during times of greater normalcy, but even then we are intimate with pleasant and painful reminders of it. As we anticipate a gradual resolution of the current crisis, we can hope that the currently intense pace and volume of change will decrease somewhat. But that will all take longer than any of us might wish. And even when it does, we're not going to get out of the fact of change--nor, if you really think about it, would we want to.

Another fact: In this period of heightened chaos and change, you - our treasured educators - need support so you can keep coping, keep adapting. Most important, you need little ways and moments to be able to relax and recharge in the midst of it all.

You might read that and think, "Oh geez, now I have to be relaxed, too?" No, this is not one more "should" to add to your load. This is an invitation.

It's an invitation to recognize: All this stuff is way, way bigger than any one of us. So much is being asked of you that was never part of any teacher training program, that never appeared in any written or unwritten agreement. And you're stepping up, doing your best, every day.

But however hard you work and try, there's an enormous amount that you have absolutely no control over. Even if you muscle up or double down, you can't predict what this afternoon or next week or next September will bring. This experience just *is* rocky and unnerving. You can do what you can do in a day. But you can't make it all go smoothly - for yourself or for anyone else. The more you can relax and lower your standards, the more you'll be able to keep riding these rapids.

My wish for you is that by practicing relaxation and self-acceptance from your seat in the life raft plunging along through the whitewater, you'll actually be increasing your resilience – which will continue benefiting you even after things settle down a bit.

To that end, here's an easy “two-fer” practice: it offers a pleasurable way of relaxing into the moment while allowing you to experience and reflect on the nature of change. This one is best done alone so you can focus on your own experience. To make sure it really happens, plan ahead and decide when during your day you will do it, and where. If necessary, alert others that you are taking this time for yourself.

Practice for Dealing with Constant Change: Eat a Raisin

- Get one or more raisins (or a small amount of another healthy food: a few chunks of apple or celery, a broken-up cracker).
- Bring the food to a spot where you can be alone for three minutes.
- Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Quiet your body: take three slow, deep breaths, or scan yourself from head to toe, inviting tense parts to relax.
- Open your eyes and pick up a raisin (or whatever food you're using).
- Reflect on all the changes this raisin went through to arrive at this moment: the preparing of the earth, the planting of and caring for the vine, the plucking, drying, transporting of the fruit, your purchase of it, and so forth.
- Examine its size, shape, color. Touch its contours; feel the gentle, springy motion when you press it and release.
- Contemplate putting it in your mouth. Notice your saliva anticipating this delight.
- Place it in your mouth—but don't chew yet. Roll it around on your tongue, feeling its leathery, ridged texture, tasting the skin's mild sweetness.
- Now chew, slowly. Notice the explosion of juice and flavor when the raisin's skin breaks, the way your teeth and saliva work to change the raisin into liquid.
- Notice the motion of tongue, throat, chest, stomach. Picture the food providing nutrients to your body.
- Recall the history of change in the life of this raisin and add your own current experience to it.
- One raisin is enough; however, some people like to repeat the process with a few.
- Reflect that this short experience enacts the fundamental experience of change that is everywhere and so much bigger than you. Allow yourself to relax into this truth. Consider the notion that as humans our biggest job may be to swim in the current of change as best we can.
- Reenter your day's activities, consciously carrying any sensations of greater groundedness and acceptance of yourself and how things are right now into your actions and interactions.

I suggest you check in with yourself or a buddy after you do this practice to reflect on how it went. You might wish to do this practice once a day for a week; then reflect on the overall impact of the practice on your sense of well-being, and decide how you want to proceed.

Q *How did it feel to experiment with tuning into the nature of change? Turn to your imaginary or real partner!*

You might be thinking:

"I have never taken the time to visualize all the changes my food goes through like that. I'll never think of raisins in the same way!"

"It's interesting to reflect on a big, abstract topic through such a short, focused, meditative activity."

"It was hard to slow down. I was hungry and tired. I started out being mindful and then I just rushed through it. I want to do it again after I've eaten a meal."

"This may seem weird but I noticed this pang of sadness when the raisin was gone. It made me think about how I have feelings about all kinds of various changes. Some changes I love. Some I hate. It's all just change, though. And most of it's out of my control. That makes me feel like I can let myself off the hook for making everything go smoothly right now."

*"I'm realizing I don't really think about the nature of change much. Watching the raisin morph and disappear was so simple, yet profound. That raisin isn't a raisin anymore! One of these days we won't be living under the conditions that currently frame our lives. Then something else will happen. **Everything** changes. I want to keep reflecting on that."*

Does this practice seem right for you? Are you willing to commit to trying it for one week? If so, I encourage you to approach it with a sense of investigation, adventure, and commitment to your own well-being.

Next week's post in the Teacher Wellness Blog Series will unpack the notion of practicing goodwill as self-care.