

## Teacher Wellness Practice #6: Practicing Goodwill as Self-Care

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Classroom Community, Wellness

You've probably heard about, or joined in, the cheers out windows and from rooftops in support of essential workers during the COVID-19 crisis. We all hope this gesture of goodwill serves as a small lift for these incredibly courageous people who are putting their lives on the line for the rest of us.

Plus, anyone who checks their mood after cheering will know firsthand what science suggests: Sending good wishes to others increases our own happiness and reduces anxiety. It also improves our feelings of care and connectedness (which naturally tends to smooth our interactions with others — an added benefit).



So if you're feeling stressed or fatigued from the juggle of teaching and managing your own life and those of your loved ones, you can give yourself a boost by simply directing friendly thoughts toward others.

This could sound selfish, like I'm recommending just *thinking* about helping people instead of actually helping them. Not at all.

First of all, just in case you need a reminder, you're already helping – a lot. You're teaching kids, interfacing with their parents, coordinating with colleagues. You may also be supporting others, including family, friends, pets, neighbors, and members of various community groups you belong to. And just by adhering to stay-at-home guidelines you're helping to “flatten the curve” and reduce the burden on struggling hospital systems.

And it goes without saying: beyond the efforts we're each making in our respective microcosms, we're all aware that a huge portion of us are at increased health and financial risk during this crisis. It behooves all of us to find ways to help those who are taking a disproportionate hit of the suffering. I'm not suggesting head-in-the-sand behavior.

The tricky thing is, if you're feeling frantic or overwhelmed or worn down to a nub, we need to start by recognizing and attending to that. And not just in order to patch you back together so you can keep educating the nation's children under absurdly difficult circumstances! Your own well-being matters, no matter how many students, loved ones, or community members you help.

So we need a practice that focuses on replenishing you.

If you have the bandwidth at the moment, you can *both* do this practice *and* contribute to the polis in a more direct way. And if you're feeling maxed, you can relax knowing that even just sending *thoughts* of well-wishing to others helps develop your capacity to keep caring and keep serving justice over the long haul.

But enough preamble; here's the practice. It's ridiculously simple and it takes *no time!* No need to schedule it in advance or involve others in the execution – though, like all the practices in this series, it's great to debrief with a buddy.

#### **Practice for Goodwill as Self-Care: Wish Someone Well**

- Think about people who play peripheral roles in your life – maybe a neighbor you spot often when you're outdoors, or someone who works at the corner grocery store. Not someone you know well or have strong feelings about one way or another.
- Pick one such person to send good wishes to.
- Every time you think of or see this person for the next week, send them good wishes. You might wish them good health, happiness, ease of well-being, the capacity to manage any stresses they are experiencing – whatever comes to you.
- Notice how you feel after you wish the person well. Don't grade or judge; just observe. You might notice very little, or you might notice various thoughts or feelings, or a mood shift.
- After a week, reflect on your feelings and thoughts about the person compared to before you started this practice. Also see if you can detect any ways that your well-wishing has affected your own sense of well-being. Again, no judging. There's no right or wrong conclusion to draw.

Note that this particular practice doesn't require interaction. You may not even cross paths with the person during the week. The primary purpose is to help you explore the power of well-wishing on you, the well-wisher. If, for you, the practice results in different or increased interactions with your recipient, that's fine too!

I suggest you check in with yourself or a buddy during the week to reflect on how it is going, and again at the end of the week to debrief on the experience. If you enjoy this practice, you might wish to continue it. It can be fascinating to see how someone who initially seems peripheral to our lives begins to occupy a special place in our hearts simply through being the recipient of our repeated

good wishes. And my hope is that this will be an easy and pleasurable way to give yourself a lift.

**Q** *How did it feel to experiment with sending good wishes to someone you don't know well? Turn to your imaginary or real partner!*

**You might be thinking:**

*"I'm so glad to have a wellness practice that not only has science behind it but doesn't add any time to my packed day."*

*"I know you said this practice isn't selfish – but to me, it does feel selfish to think good thoughts about someone but not actually lift a finger for them. My reaction prompted a positive action, though – I've signed up for a stint providing hotline support to isolated elders."*

*"I'm doing my own version of this practice. I take time before I go to bed to hold everyone I know and everyone I don't know in my prayers. I wish them well-being and happiness. It keeps my heart open."*

*"I appreciate the chance to focus on well-wishing without the usual complications of interpersonal relationships. It allows me to notice how my heart expands just by focusing on someone's well-being. It feels good to care, pure and simple."*

*"I picked our postal worker. Over the week, I've started spontaneously engaging more with her – from an appropriate social distance, of course. I'm finding out about her feelings about her job, and how her family's doing. She doesn't seem so peripheral anymore!"*

*"If I care this much about someone I never gave much thought to, after a few days of sending them good wishes, what does that say about my relationship to the billions of other people on this planet? There's something profound about this that I want to keep thinking about."*

Does this practice intrigue you? Are you willing to try it out for one week? If so, I suggest you approach it with a sense of playfulness, curiosity, and commitment to your own well-being.

Next week's post in the Teacher Wellness Blog Series will explore the benefit of setting intentions and then letting go of the results.